TRIBES OF PAREA
SPEAR OF VENGEANCE
BY ALEXANDER NOBEL

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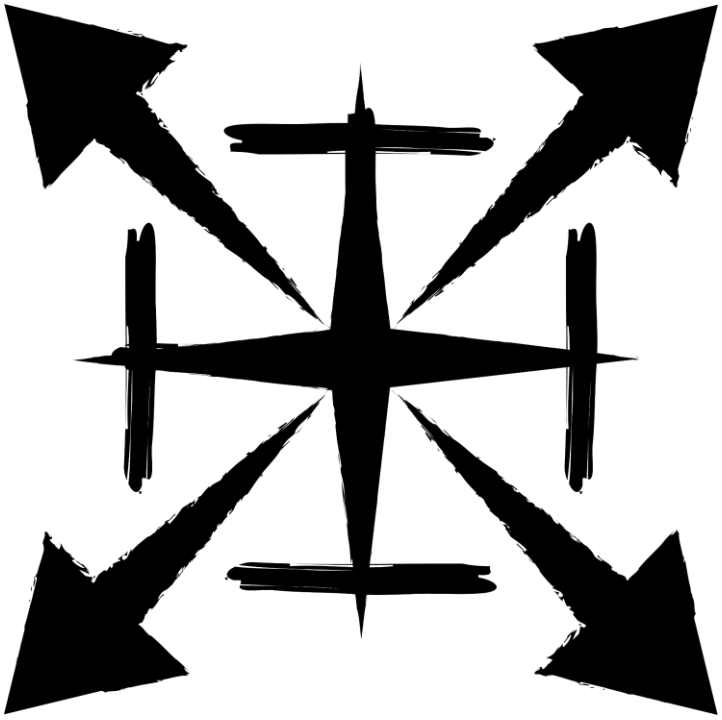
SPEAR OF VENGEANCE



In primordial ages, in the infinite plains, in the unending forests, in the eternal seas, under the endless suns.

There is life in Parea, and it wars and breeds, it sows,

harvests, builds and worships. It reasons and creates, binds magic to word by means of signs.

In primordial ages, in the infinite plains, in the unending forests, in the eternal seas, under the endless suns.

There are spirits in Parea, and they warp and shape the world, they pull the suns from the heavens and listen to the mortals' pleas. They punish and bless, they defend and

obliterate in the ways of magic that they so wisely govern.

In primordial ages, in the infinite plains, in the unending forests, in the eternal seas, under the endless suns.

There is the individual in Parea, and they eat and drink. They join the wild hunts and the harvest. They seek out the fertile groves, beseech the wise. They learn and walk the ways of control, freedom, growth and destruction for good or ill.

In primordial ages, there is Parea.

SPEAR OF VENGEANCE

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Special thanks to my beta readers and my parents

who have helped me even in the most dire times.

Trigger warnings: Gore, Death, Animal Cruelty, Genocide

CHAPTER 1:

THE GENTLE

The local sun shone warmly, illuminating the forest, sending warm rays through leaves and moss as a fat wild pig traipsed into a clearing, sniffing the ground in search of food. The animal was completely unaware of the shadow lurking in the tall trees above, obscured by leaves and vines.

The shadow was a humanoid cat that crept through the treetops, flexing the muscles of his black and white body, his golden eyes fixed on the pig, his right hand firmly grasping a stone spear. The feline hunter grinned, certain of the kill as his tendons flexed, ready to pounce. He took a deep breath, then leapt.

The pig heard the rustle from above, but it was too late. In an instant, the tomcat was on top of the animal, his paws slammed into its spine, claws extended and digging into fur and skin for a better grip. The hog squealed in pain as the tomcat drove the spear down with both arms, using his strength and the force of the fall to drive the stone tip deep into the prey's skull, shattering bone and ripping flesh to bore into the creature's brain. The hog collapsed, the cat standing triumphantly over it.

Terri smiled at his successful kill. He pulled the bloodied spear from the pig's head, and knelt down beside it. He noticed the animal's eyes darting around while the body twitched and squirmed. He frowned. This was not a clean kill. The animal was suffering. He quickly grabbed a nearby rock and lifted it high, letting gravity do the work as he let it slam down on the pig's head, crushing its skull completely which finally made the body go limp.

He sighed with relief, glad its suffering was over. He touched one of the green markings painted on his body and prayed for the hog's spirit to find peace in the spirit wilds after its quick, merciful death. He was glad that there was no more suffering than necessary to get this meal.

He got up and stretched, reaching for the rope he wore on his hip, tied to his loincloth. He quickly fashioned a knot around the pig's hind legs and began to drag it back home, leaving a trail of blood through the forest.

His village was thankfully not far away and within half an hour of marching he could see the wooden homes far above in the trees. Each home was connected by a network of ladders and rope bridges crisscrossing between tree trunks, forming the village his tribe called home.

A brown cat, whose body was covered in the same markings as Terri, swung down from a vine, smiling as he landed gracefully before his fellow cat.

"Terri, back so soon? And with a nice kill, too!"

He called out. Terri nodded in response.

"Yes, Mirm, the forest was generous today. Muiari blessed my hunt before I went out"

He gestured at the largest structure in the trees, an ornately carved wooden temple high above the ground.

"Now come and help me haul it up so we can feast tonight! This should be the last prey we need for the festival."

he said, handing the brown cat the rope he had been dragging.

After another five minutes of pulling the hog up to the village and stowing it away in the tribe's communal larder to be butchered, Terri left for his own hut. He walked over the familiar rope bridge to the hut bearing his symbol, painted in the same bright green that was marked on his body and everyone else in the tribe. Inside, he knelt by his wash bowl, using the water he had brought from the nearby river this morning to wash up, with a rag, removing the blood from his arms, hands, and paws, making sure he would be presentable for tonight's festivities. He even stripped naked and exchanged his worn loincloth for his nicer new one he had made just a few days prior.

Once he felt clean and presentable, he grabbed his wooden mask that hung above his bedding, a pile of furs and straw. The mask was the abstract likeness of a cat, carved in wood and painted with his tribe's markings. He fastened its strap to the back of his head, letting the mask slide onto his face as he stepped out of his hut.

He saw other members of his tribe doing the same, leaving their huts while wearing their wooden masks. They all walked across the many bridges to the central temple where torches were already lit. As he joined the stream of the crowd he could smell the delicious scent of roasting prey from a few huts away. He couldn't wait for the rite to end so they all could go to the cooking hut and enjoy the deer and pigs roasting over open flames.

He was now right outside the temple, close enough to see the carvings of giant, long-necked lizards in the wooden doors. He bowed his head respectfully to the holy images before entering the temple. The interior was torchlit as well, creating a warm glow on everything and everyone inside. The sun outside was dimming, enhancing the room's lighting, making the space feel even more intimate.

He checked if his favored spot on the second floor overlooking the central holy space was available, but to his chagrin, the upper level was already full. It was popular since this was the only building in the village that had more than one level.

He resigned himself to the ground floor, kneeling beside his fellow cats as they all crowded around the center, the most holy place in the village. At the center of the room stood a lavishly carved pedestal and surrounded by bowls and piles of various offerings. On this pedestal sat Muiari, his tribe's guardian spirit.

Her body glowed in a soft green hue. She was semi-transparent with long, branch-like arms that reached up high alongside her incredibly long neck, topped by a pure white mask covered in green markings. It was featureless except for two dark eyeholes. Despite the non-expressive nature of the mask everyone in the room knew she was smiling at them.

The spirit spoke when the last of his tribe had piled into the temple and knelt. Her voice was like the rustle of leaves and vines yet still clear and audible to all.

"My children, I welcome you for tonight's rites. You all know tonight is special. We will grant mercy to our beloved."

Her long, glowing, branch-arms gestured at a very old female wrapped in a blanket, kneeling right in front of her. She was the Chief's grandmother, her eyes were cloudy, and her fur had turned entirely white with age. Terri had no idea how old she was but he knew she was ancient.

"Our dear Raima has asked to be granted mercy. Her bones hurt so much that she cannot rest, she can't eat without being tortured by her stomach. She has deemed joining me will be better than to continue as she has. So tonight I will welcome Raima to take her pain away, to grant her the mercy we all should strive to give with every breath and every act."

They all bowed their heads in respect to both the spirit and the elder as Muiari began wrapping her long arms around the elder, pulling her close in an affectionate embrace before pure gleaming light started to bleed from every point of contact, burning through the old cats body like a heatless blaze, filling the temple with soft green light. The light enveloped her quickly until the spirit was just holding a glowing mass that slowly faded, becoming less bright and more transparent until the elder's blanket fell on the floor with no body left to support it.

The tribe began chanting, swaying in a common rhythm on their knees, singing the elder into the afterlife while her family, including the chief, were hugging and weeping beside the spirit, comforting each other. It was a somber moment. Terri hated this part of the goodbye rites. He always enjoyed what followed far more. Once the song ended Muiari lifted her arms again

"We have given relief from pain. The quick, painless death."

The entire tribe repeated

"The quick, painless death."

It was a holy concept to them. As carnivores, they could not avoid killing, but their guardian had taught them the mercy of the quick clean kill. On every young cat's first hunt, it was the first lesson taught. They all knew how much their guardian spirit valued mercy, so they all strived to embody it.

"Pain has ended, but grief will not, so let us temper grief by remembering Raima and celebrating all the moments we had with her. Let the festival begin!"

The doors of the temple swung open as they all got up with bittersweet smiles, some wiping tears from their eyes. But with each step away from the central holy and towards the feast, people's steps lightened and soft smiles crept onto their faces. Celebrating the life of the deceased was always the light at the end of the tunnel when the time came for the tribe's oldest.

Terri was one of the last to leave after giving the chief's family his condolences. He was about to pass the doors when he saw something blue flitting past him through a window in the temple. He knew this sound, an arrow. His mind raced in confusion. Why would someone shoot an arrow in the temple? Was this some form of tasteless prank by youngsters? Those were the only two thoughts he had time for when an ear-rending screech from behind made everyone turn their heads.

His golden eyes went wide in horror as he beheld Muiari who had been hit by the arrow, its tip gleaming in various hues, mostly blue. From the tip, light bled from the spirit's body as she convulsed violently and the blue glow spread over her translucent body in seconds. With one final agonized scream, her shape burst into glowing dust that scattered immediately while her white mask shattered on the ground with the arrow where she had sat. Suddenly any sense of safety was gone, he felt hollow for a moment, as if his mind had left his body to escape the horror.

Everyone who was still inside turned immediately to run to the shattered mask, Terri in the lead picked up the arrow in disbelief while others tried to reassemble the mask as if that would bring their guardian back. He stared at the stone the arrow was made of. He had heard of this material from the shaman. Waterstone, the bane of all spirits.

He was not given time to grieve or investigate who had committed this heinous crime. More arrows struck outside and a rising tide of screams and pounding footsteps could be heard. There was no way the people outside already knew what had happened here. Something else was unfolding. He ran outside, still clutching the arrow.

What he saw only deepened the horror. People were panicking, mothers whisked their kittens to safety while anyone not occupied with children or the elderly tried to extinguish the flames spreading from burning arrows embedded throughout the village.

The archers were impossible to miss, a group of birds with bodies covered in red markings. They were circling above the trees, riding large winged lizards as they dove to loose flaming arrows at his tribe's village. Even with the dimming light he could make out the outlines of winged people flying in or mounted on beasts in the sky raining fire from above.

Then new attackers emerged, more birds rising from below and landing on the bridges and platforms as they drew obsidian swords, spears, slings and clubs. They attacked immediately, chanting in a language Terri could not understand. Their markings matched no tribe he knew but their intent was clear. He sprinted to his hut where he grabbed his trusty stone spear, still slick with the hog's blood. He ran back into the blazing chaos. It was a massacre. His tribe was not prepared for this surprise attack from a flying foe.

Terri could only watch as those who could not arm themselves in time were slaughtered while the fire spread. The cries of children and the screams of his fellow cats drove the tomcat into rage and he immediately charged the nearest bird, who had his back turned, firing rocks from his sling at families fleeing over a nearby bridge. Terri's face was twisted in righteous anger as he rammed the stone tip of his spear into the bird's back, tearing through feathers, skin and flesh, piercing the invader's heart, making the bird gasp before the spear was pulled out and the body collapsed to the ground.

He hissed at the corpse. The quick painless death was too merciful but he knew this is what Muiari would have wanted him to do. She wouldn't have tolerated suffering. So he moved on, twirling his spear into position as he charged another bird hacking at the ropes of one of the bridges with an obsidian axe. He thrust his spear forward as he leapt into the melee, taking the bird by surprise who now turned, raising his axe in defense, barely deflected the blow, avoiding a fatal hit. Terri hissed again.

"Die, invader!"

He screamed as he pulled the spear back again, going in for another attack, this time aiming lower below the bird's guard, stabbing his opponent's thigh, piercing the flesh and making the bird scream and curse in its foreign tongue. His opponent lunged forward with a malevolent gleam in his dark eyes. Terri dodged backward before he suddenly felt a clawed foot dig painfully into his side, pushing him off balance as the kick connected.

He turned his head to see who had kicked him and came face to face with an abomination, a raven marked with red lines like the others, its eyes blazing with unnatural fire and his head and right arm encrusted in obsidian. This raven was the last thing he saw before his world tumbled. He fell off the platform, seeing the trees and village above rapidly pull away from him as he fell until a brutal impact plunged him into darkness.

CHAPTER 2:

THE LIVING

At first, there was a searing sensation in his head, followed by a thumping pain at the back and a sharp sting in his side. He opened his eyes, groaning in pain, blinking to clear his vision. It was day again, and when his vision cleared, the first thing he saw was the smoldering corpse of his village. Even the trees it had been built around were burned out, gleaming with embers in the charred husks of their trunks that loomed over him. Parts of the village crashed into a growing heap of rubble where blackened bones, burned wood and still-living flames piled higher by the hour.

The sun was already beginning to retreat into the sky. With no spirit to hold the star down, it would retreat back into the firmament, leaving Terri's former home in the darkness, allowing the spirit wilds to creep in and reclaim the land in its most brutal, untamed form.

He wanted to scream, to cry, to despair as he searched the ruins for other survivors. He wanted to just lie there until the sun would disappear and malevolent spirits would claim him. But he knew he couldn't. He had to survive, cling to life, maybe even find survivors.

He gritted his teeth and got up. His side bled and his head throbbed. Miraculously, his mask had not only protected his head in the fall but had also survived the impact and still sat firmly on his face. He caressed it for a moment, realizing it was all he had left of his tribe.

Terri shook his head to snap out of it, and with the sun leaving, he had limited time to gather the bare essentials. His first priority was to stop the bleeding. He stumbled to a nearby fern and snapped off its long leaves, the broad green strands made decent improvised bandages that he tied tightly around his chest to staunch the bleeding from the claw marks in his side.

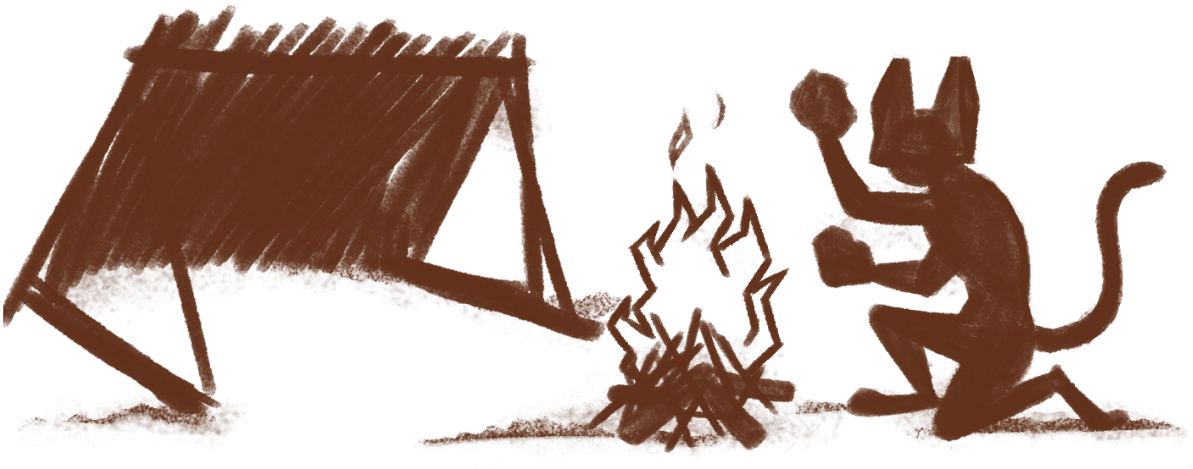
Next came food and shelter. He knew he wouldn't get any weapon or rope for traps today so he'd have to turn to a carnivore's desperation meal. Normally, cats consumed little to no fruit or leaves but for now he would have to subsist on foraged food alone. He knew nearby there were berry bushes that his tribe rarely touched, only using their berries for occasional seasoning of meats. The tomcat

ate his fill of berries. He knew his body would punish him heavily after a few days of such a diet but he hoped by then he'd be able to hunt again. If push came to shove he could always hunt like the ancestors with his teeth and bare claws.

Once his belly was full he began gathering sticks and large leaves, creating a lean-to by propping a flimsy frame of twigs on two larger branches and covering it all with leaves to give shelter. He padded

the inside with loose moss. It wouldn't measure up to his old bed of furs and straw but it would have to suffice now.

With food and shelter dealt with, Terri spent the next hour or so scrounging in the riverbed for the familiar flint of this region. Once he found a decently sized and shaped piece, he sat down by the side of the river and began striking the flint with another stone, using his experience and the pitch of the sounds to estimate the size and angle of the cracks. Slowly, the uneven rock became flatter, and he worked a curve into one side of the triangle he was making, forming a crude blunt knife shape. Unfortunately for him the rhythm of strikes brought back memories of drums and celebrations, painful memories that made him fight back tears as he worked, trying to focus on the rock every time they welled up.



A blade was the first tool he would need. So he grabbed a stick with a dull end and began snapping off smaller shards of flint to define the sharp edge on the curved side. Deer antler would have made this easier and far less crude but he had to make do with what he had. He worked carefully so as not to get another cut he could barely treat. He knew he was working against the clock, but that was no excuse to be sloppy.

With his new flint blade in hand, he began gathering leaves and weeds, choosing ones with good long, strong fibers. Once he had a good amount, he sat down with his blade and began stripping them down, making piles of raw fibers, which he wove into thread and thin bands of coarse string. Not as sturdy as leather, but just stable enough to be attached to a few large leaves which he folded to create a basic pouch. With the bag attached to his loincloth, he began gathering wood. The sun was already beginning to dim for the night so when he sat down to start his fire it was already fairly dark.

He held a smoldering piece of what had once been his home to the gathered kindling and twigs and started a fire, blowing to fan the tiny flames to life, adding more sticks once the fire was bigger. Once he had his fire set, he ate some more berries and retired for the night, sleeping next to the flame in his moss bedding. The heat was not why he slept by the flame. His tropical jungle home was warm to begin with even at night. It was more to ward off predators from turning the tomcat into a meal.

His first night of sleep was thankfully dreamless, leaving the tomcat well-rested by morning. When he opened his eyes, the sun was once again higher in the sky. He wasn't any good at calculating things, but he estimated that he might have two more days before the sun would be too far away to give any meaningful light to this patch of land.

He got up and once again returned to the river. He skipped breakfast to search for another piece of flint. He had a knife and in theory he could hunt with a knife. But that was a risk he didn't want to take, so he began the knapping process again. This time working the piece into a sharp triangle, working both sides into edges and the tip into a sharp point. Finally he worked notches into the back end, being very careful with his stick to not ruin the spearhead.

He set the spearhead aside and began looking for a long branch. He would not have time to straighten the shaft or work it into a perfectly round shape, so he grabbed the straightest piece of wood he could find and began hacking away at its top to create a notch where he could press the stone spear tip. The pressure fit was fine, but it would not survive more than one use. He knew he'd have to wrap and glue it.

For the wrapping, he had leftover plant twine to use from his bag project. But for the glue, the tomcat would have to get creative. His tribe's normal glue recipe was a bit too involved to make right now but he knew nearby grew a patch of wild Obomelons. The fruit were sweet, large, and reddish-purple during the rainy season when they looked like head-sized oblong grapes. But now was not the rainy season. It was the dry season meaning the fruits would be hard, small and green. He knew that the unripe obomelons could be smashed and their contents boiled down to a black sticky goo that made for an inferior but usable glue.

He set off to gather ten of the unripe bulbs. Once he was back, he laid them out on a flat stone and began crushing them with another rock until only green pulp remained on the flat stone. He then gathered four smaller rocks and arranged them around his fire, which was just embers that were quickly revived with some air and fresh fuel. All he had to do now was to set the flat stone atop the other 4 over the fire, creating a cooking stone. For the stone, he avoided riverstones. Wet rock could explode in fire. Porous stone was just as dangerous, dry on the surface but trapping water within.

Once the cooking stone had heated, he began moving the pulp around, ensuring it blackened evenly and shrank as the water evaporated, leaving only the tar-like glue behind. He began soaking the plant fibers in the glue and started to wrap them around the spear's shaft and through the notches he had put in the tip. Within minutes, as the glue cooled, it hardened. He shook and jabbed the spear to test the bond. It was good enough to hunt or fight with. It was a low-quality, improvised weapon, but it would have to do.

The entire process of making this spear had consumed much of his day, so he set out immediately to hunt. He was extremely hungry after skipping breakfast and he needed to get meat in his belly as soon as possible to not keep subsisting on plants alone. He climbed into the trees using his feline grace to scale one trunk and leap from tree to tree. He kept his eyes to the ground, gleaming with hunger until he saw it. One of the red deer that lived here. This one seemed to be a younger male that had lost a fight for rule of the herd and had been exiled. A perfect target, with its smaller horns and already weakened, wounded stature, Terri got ready to pounce on it. Dropping down the same way he had done with the boar, slamming his spear into the animal's head. This time, it was a clean hit, immediately destroying the brainstem, making the animal collapse as Terri landed softly on its corpse.

Terri jumped off, leaving the spear embedded in the head as he got to work. He pulled his knife from the pouch and sliced open the animal's still-warm body. He knew the best parts and went for them first, the kidneys, heart and liver and stuffing them in his pouch before moving on to the remaining organs, He reached elbow-deep into the deer's body cavity to gut it on the forest floor. He had to prioritize the most nutritious parts over anything he could not prepare in a day and that would spoil in his bag. Once he was done he grabbed a rock and struck the stags' antlers, working them until he broke off two tines of the animal's crown. He chose those for future knapping work. It pained him to leave such a nice set of antlers behind, but he knew he could not carry them, so he took only what he needed. He then dragged the animal back to his camp, where he severed the head with his knife, tossed the brains and organs from his pouch onto the cooking stone to sizzle, skinned the buck, and began cutting the best muscles for travel rations.

Once the organs were cooked, he took a break to eat them before placing more meat on the cooking stone, trying to prepare as much as he could. He knew he couldn't process the entire animal, which pained him since he knew what the wealth of resources he was leaving behind. All he could do was work himself to exhaustion, setting up extra fires and sharpening sticks to drive into the ground and hang meat from to smoke overnight. He knew this would likely be the last day of proper sunlight he would get and he needed to spend it preparing food. He wished he had a few extra days to make leather and replace the flimsy plant pouch, but he knew the sun would not last that long.

That evening he fell into his moss bed, exhausted, and after washing the blood off himself, he fell asleep almost instantly as the meat was smoked. He ate as much of the cooked meat as he could before bed. He didn't even have the time to congratulate himself on only having to survive one day on berries before being able to regain his diet of meat. Instead, he drifted off into a restless sleep filled with nightmares of his burning village, leaving him waking the next morning in a sweat.

He groaned as he got up, feeling the strain of that night and his nightmares. But he had no time to give in to his despair. Not yet, at least. There was still work to do. He decided to wash his loincloth

before he set out at the end of the day. So he stripped and washed it in the river. He laid it by the fire and returned to butchering, smoking and cooking every scrap of meat he could, eating as he went to fill up on calories. He didn't mind being naked as he worked since there was no one around to see him anyway. So he worked through the day making rations, his tasks had been varied but the monotony of cutting, skewering and cooking meat let his mind wander.

He had used these days to prepare himself, to prepare for a journey. But he had no idea where to go. His mournful anger spurred him to seek out tracks and hunt the attackers, to find them and kill them for what they had done. The rational part of him deemed it wiser to make the trek to the tribe of rabbitfolk that lived in the foothills of the nearby mountains. They were close friends to his tribe and would surely welcome him. He knew he could find sanctuary there, but his heart did not yearn for sanctuary, it yearned for revenge.

The cat's ruminations were interrupted when his sharp hearing made his ears perk and turn toward the noise. He held still and listened. He could hear footsteps drawing closer to the clearing where he had made camp. He immediately grabbed his spear and slipped into nearby shrubs. By the sound he could tell it was something bipedal, it could not be swiftclaws or other large lizards, it sounded too light. His golden eyes narrowed and his pupils tightened to slits to focus in. He slipped away to hide in some shrubs. He held his breath when someone left the jungle thicket and stepped into the clearing. It was a bird, and certainly one of the attackers. The male sparrow was painted in the same red markings, wearing a black loincloth. Terri's blood immediately began to boil. He noticed the bag on the bird's hip but more importantly noticed the man's spear. Its obsidian tip glistened menacingly as he held it while looking around.

Terri's muscles tightened, getting ready to ambush, ready to get revenge. He waited patiently for the bird to investigate his camp, the smoke from his fires was clearly what had attracted the bird. The bird bent down to inspect the lean to with Terri’s bag next to it. This was when he struck, leaping from the bush filled with anger and resolve. Thrusting his spear into the bird's chest from behind, or at least that was the plan. In reality the enemy reacted just barely out of the spear's way as he swung around his own weapon, pointing its tip at Terri now who had to duck to avoid being stabbed himself.

Terri pulled his own spear back, sliding the flint blade along the leg of the bird, tearing a large wound in his thigh making the bird scream and lose footing as he stumbled back. Terri smiled as he heard the bird’s scream, finding satisfaction in the invaders' pain. A quick, painless death felt very far away now.

The naked cat exploited the bird's momentary lapse in footing and followed up with another forward jab of his spear hitting the bird surely in the chest. He struck the lungs making his opponent choke and collapse while clawing at the shaft to pull it out mid fall. He laid on the ground grabbing Terri's spear, desperately trying to dislodge it but Terri's rage drove him to just dig it deeper, pushing down to make the weapon pass through the bird, pinning him to the floor as it bored out of the invaders back and dug into the dirt below.

Terri saw the pain and fear in his enemy’s eyes and repaid them with nothing but his own hateful glare that was mixed with something else from deep within him. He lifted his paw and brought his leg down as hard as he could, leaning all of his weight into it to crush the bird’s face, caving in his beak as the noise and movement immediately stopped. The cat was breathing heavily, his right leg covered in blood as he lifted his paw, exhausted while the bird bled out in the grass next to the fire.

Once he was certain the invader was dead, he breathed a sigh of relief and pulled his spear free, realizing the flint tip was dislodged and shattered from being driven into the ground too hard. He sighed and tossed it aside. He was sweaty and covered in blood, and he had no time or energy to make a new spear so he simply grabbed the bird's weapon, a much nicer spear, made with expert skill and apparently enchanted. He saw two sigils scratched into the shaft. He didn't know much magic, but he could tell this weapon was magical. He took the bird's bag off of his corpse to check its contents too. As he had expected, he found a rolled up leather skin inside.

When unrolled it was covered in a magic circle filled with sigils connected by various lines. The pattern was burnt into the skin. Terri knew this practice. The small portable circle was enough to recharge the spells imbued on a weapon or tool in the field as long as the user had the required spiritual and material fuel. It worked like a normal magic circle where the spell in question demanded material fuel as well as an action that corresponded to the spell. His tribe's shaman had once explained to him that there are four winds of magic: freedom, control, destruction and growth. Terri had never listened closely but now he wished he had. He lacked the understanding needed to use the spell. So he rolled the skin back up.

Next, he couldn't help but acknowledge the rest of the bag's contents. Except for a rations bundle, it was filled to the brim with raw, unprocessed waterstone and a small stone pickaxe. Clearly, this was one of the invaders' gatherers on his way to return more waterstone to his tribe, likely to repeat what had been done to his tribe with others, or at the very least arm a force to travel through a particularly dangerous patch of the spirit wilds.

Either way, this bag was priceless for trade, but also very heavy. Even if he wanted to trade, carrying this much stone with him would burn too much energy to be worth it, given his limited food supply. So he dumped its contents and only took two of the largest stones that looked the best.

He then took the bag, put the leather scroll back inside and began stuffing it with his provisions. filling it to the brim with smoked meat. Unfortunately it wasn't fully smoked or true jerky, but it would give

the meat an extra few days before it spoiled, giving him more chances to cook it on the way. Lastly, he took the bird's water bag, glad he had something to carry water so he wouldn't have to visit rivers and ponds in the spirit wilds.

Terri realized the sun was beginning to dim, probably for the last time before it rose too far in the sky. He felt a deep melancholy as he looked up at the dimming star, knowing this would be the last day it would shine on this place. Once he had given himself a moment for this thought he hurried to pack up all he needed. Taking the crude knife and the sturdy spear, his leaf pouch, and the leather bag, he even stripped the bird to take its loincloth in case he needed leather later. He then quickly washed the blood and sweat off his body, dressed in his own loincloth, and breathed in deeply. He looked at the jungle and took his first step in.

CHAPTER 3:

THE WOUNDED

As night fell for the final time behind him, Terri wandered deeper into the familiar jungle of his homeland. He knew that in a few hours the trees would grow darker, the air heavier, the light more scarce and the plants stranger. The spirit wilds were not a place to take lightly. These vast stretches of land between villages were dangerous and inhabited by the most ferocious animals and spirits that did not appreciate mortals treading the wilds. That was why every village needed to worship their local spirits, so their patrons could ward off this magical darkness and give them land to grow and flourish in.

He wished he had the time to knap the waterstone he had into a blade to fight off evil spirits but he needed to move quickly knowing that there was always the chance that the rabbit village had or would be attacked like his. He needed to get there fast. He had decided to follow his rational thoughts rather than his desires after his unexpected fight. If a single scout wielded magical weapons there was no way he would be able to take on the entire tribe alone. Even without the magic it was plainly an insane idea that had just been fueled by his hate in the moment, so dismissing it was easy.

Terri's train of thought was interrupted when he heard a noise and realized that during his musings he had fully transitioned into the spirit wilds. He lowered his spear to aim it at the source of the sound. He considered for a moment whether he should climb the trees or maybe just run rather than stand his ground. But whatever was coming was coming fast and it sounded big. It was now crashing through the brush, making a lot of noise as it approached. Terri did not take his chances and immediately started scaling the closest tree. When he was halfway up the entire thing shook violently with a loud crash. When he looked down he saw a trihorn lizard.

He knew these animals, large, strong herbivores with crests of bone and three horns on their heads that they used to ram their enemies. He was glad to have gotten out of the way. This bull seemed especially angry as it pulled those mighty horns out of the tree's trunk. It glared up at him and bellowed its warning call. He hissed back and hopped to the next tree over. He assumed this male was protecting its territory or its herd. Either way he wanted nothing to do with it and left it behind, traveling through the trees, swinging down on vines and climbing and jumping back up to new trees where needed, moving from branch to branch with feline grace and accuracy.

Soon the trihorn was far behind him, and he slowed down, still moving from tree to tree but not at the speed needed to outrun a beast like it. He decided to check his heading and climbed all the way to the top of the tree he was currently on. He looked at the dark sky above. Without a sun nearby the blackness of the void above was

overwhelming if not for the tiny stars connected by the glowing spidersilk threads that made the constellations visible in the sky.

Every child knew about the skyspiders and how they wove the constellations into the sky. Their art was unchanging once a constellation was spun, it never changed position or shape so for all the time Terri had been alive the constellation of the winged spear pointed at the rabbits village making it extremely easy to just follow the stars until the mountains appeared in the distance when the distant mists revealed them.

Now that he had his bearing he adjusted his path following the spear more accurately while keeping to the treetops. This was more taxing than walking but also much safer, he decided, especially if there were large territorial trihorns around. He kept moving until he felt tired. It was hard to tell time with no visible sun in the distance so Terri just made himself as comfortable as he could in the crown of a tree and ate some of the meat he had brought before dozing off for the night.

The next morning was not a morning at all. It simply was the time he woke up. The same black hue remained, with the same glowing constellations up above. He stretched and scratched his back before moving on. It felt strange to wake up in the dark but he had done this before, after all his best friend lived in the rabbit village.

Terri couldn't help but think of him as he moved on. Belloth was a tall black rabbit with more fur on his chest than Terri had on his entire head. He was the strongest person the tomcat knew with legs powerful enough to break an adult boar's spine in half with a standing kick. Terri knew that one from experience. Sometimes Terri wished he had Belloth’s strength but all he had was speed and reflexes. He wondered if he could have fought off the invaders if he had possessed Belloth’s strength and wielded his stone mace that day.

He pondered this as he kept moving through the trees but even with Belloth's strength, he was not sure he could have won the day. After all there were a good number of cats in the village that were stronger than him even if none of them matched Belloth's ferocity and power.

These thoughts kept him busy even as he took a break to eat more of the meat, deciding to consume the rations he had taken from the bird's corpse and take a big swig from the water bag. As he ate, he heard something below, a commotion in the woods, he saw the strange glowing plants below in the darkness moving and he heard noises of some creature followed by a screech and a thump. Something had fallen down there. He carefully climbed down to lower branches to investigate.

Once he dipped below the foliage he saw something he hadn't expected: a female bird, specifically a robin standing in the brush, holding a beaten-up-looking obsidian sword. Most of its teeth were missing, making it look quite worn if not outright broken. She was breathing heavily and standing next to a dead swiftclaw lizard.

He was impressed. Swiftclaws were quite terrifying. They all moved quickly and sported large toe claws they used to rip into prey while holding on with claws and teeth. Killing one was certainly an achievement. He was already contemplating how to kill her when he noticed something about her that was different from the other birds he had fought. She had no tribal markings, her feathers were completely void of symbols. All she seemed to have on her was a pouch, a rope, her weapon and the chestwrappings and loincloth she wore.

He wasn't sure if she was one of the invaders or just an unrelated traveler. He decided if he couldn't tell from appearance he'd have to simply ask.

“Hey there, bird. Are you with the red tribe?”

He called down, unsure if she'd even understand his language. Her head turned up at him, straining her eyes to see him. Terri remembered that not every species could see in the dark. He was tempted to reveal himself but remained hidden, not yet willing to get close.

“Oh no not anymore. Zarkan can go fuck himself with that sword of his!”

She said, poison dripping from her voice. Whoever Zarkan was, she must have hated him. For now this was enough for Terri to trust her at least enough to show himself. Terri felt fairly secure in his ability to kill this bird too if she was lying. He was also pretty relieved that she had either learned the local language or had been blessed with a language spell.

“Woah there, slow down. First of all let's make introductions now that I know I don't have to kill you for being with them. I'm Terri.”

He held up his hands, both open, showing no ill intent toward her in the region's common greeting. He was taking a risk by doing this but for now his curiosity held his malice toward all birds at bay. She seemed a bit suspicious but mirrored the gesture. Terri relaxed a bit and listened closely to judge her words.

“I'm Zani, daughter of chief Zephro. I… am really sorry for what happened to your tribe. I was one of the scouts sent out to look at your tribe and I promise i dipped the moment I realized what Zarkan was about to-”

Her explanation was interrupted as suddenly two more swiftclaws burst though the underbrush. Her eyes widened and she cursed in her native language.

“I thought I lost them!”

She held out her sword and Terri did the same with his spear holding it out threateningly at the animals. Zani made her feathers stand up to seem bigger and Terri did the same with fur as he hissed at the lizards, bearing his teeth at them.

The animals seemed to hesitate but only for a moment before the one across from Zani pounced trying to pin her. She spun to the side, slashing into the predator's leg, tearing a deep nasty wound. Terri's opponent followed suit but unlike Zani, he stood his ground using his spear's reach by thrusting it forward driving it deep into the creature's chest. It screeched in pain as the two glyphs at the end of the spear's shaft glowed, one red one yellow. Suddenly, Terri felt oddly refreshed and the lizard recoiled from the spear, now bleeding profusely from the deep hole in its chest.

It screeched at Terri and began circling him while its packmate got up after falling to the floor from the wound Zani had inflicted. Unfortunately for the limping swiftclaw, Zani had already used her wings to fly up above on a branch, ready to jump down again on the unsuspecting animal, raking the teeth of her sword along its feathered spine causing multiple gashes that made the creature wail as it snapped for her, catching her arm. The bird screamed as her blood sprayed onto the ground.

Thankfully the teeth had only torn the skin rather than ripping off the entire arm. Terri, meanwhile, took his lizard by surprise, lunging at it with his spear and ramming it squarely into its side, making it screech and snarl as its powerful legs tried to kick at him, swinging sharp claws into nothingness thanks to the spear's reach.

Once again, the symbols glowed, and Terri felt energized as the creature wailed in pain. He gave the spear a twist, widening the animal's wound and increasing its shrill screeches of pain. The animal tore itself away from the weapon and ran off. Its companion, realizing the turn of events, fled as well, not even bothering to finish off the wounded Zani. Terri was tempted to finish her, just to be safe, but her willingness to fight with him rather than running to leave him to the animals had made him more inclined to believe she was honest.

Once both animals were gone, Terri set his spear aside and quickly took the remaining meat out of his leaf bag, stuffing it into his mouth so none of it would go to waste as he began to rewrap her arm using the large leaves and loincloth to wrap her arm and using the string to hold the leaves in place with the clean side of the leather towards her arm.

"There you go, that should hold for a while"

He said, offering his hand to help her to her feet.

"T-thanks"

She responded before wincing, holding her arm.

"This shit hurts like a bitch. Do you have anything for pain?"

He shook his head.

"We could look for numbleaf, but most normal plants don't grow this deep in the spirit wilds. You can probably bite on a twig while we go. By the way, why are you here?"

She sighed.

"I don't really know. I just wanted to get away from my tribe. Things have gone too far, they have become monstrous, and it's all because of my brother Zarkan. He's gone insane. He's gotten deeply into destruction rituals and it changed him. At first it was just him being more erratic and angry, then he slowly started turning into this monster. Whatever he is now it's not my brother anymore and the rest of the tribe follow him. It started with attacking cannibals and raider tribes, scum that no one

would miss. But your village was the first truly peaceful place we attacked. That's why I left. I wasn't willing to get innocent blood on my hands…"

Her eyes filled with sadness and anger as she talked about her brother and tribe.

"Is that why you have no markings or destination? Did you wash them off and just started walking to find a place to stay?"

He asked, feeling bad for her. They had both endured losses of community, so Terri felt immediately sympathetic toward her.

"Yeah. I'm kind of just going until I hit a village but…it's been hard. Being exiled from the tribe meant I got no supplies. Moving through the spirit wilds like this is rough"

"Well uhm do you eat meat? Because I made lots of that and if you want you can follow me. I'm headed for a friendly tribe who would probably take you in."

She nodded and smiled softly.

"I can handle eating meat and I'd love to come along. The further I get away from my tribe the better. I want nothing to do with them."

Terri handed her a strip of cooked deer to eat.

"Well with your arm hurt I guess moving through the treetops is out of the question so let's move on the ground until it gets better."

He began walking heading in the direction of the winged spear again. She followed close behind clutching her now even more broken sword. It was almost so damaged Terri was considering just giving her his crude flint knife if the sword disintegrated any more.

As they walked the land became more marshy with solid dirt becoming first wet, then soggy and finally drenched in ankle-deep dirty water. Terri was not worried. He had been through this swamp many times and knew the safe path. The only threat here were dorgas, large frog-like creatures with armored skin that spat torrents of acid in the rainy season. For now he knew they all were sleeping in the deepest parts of the bog. The swamps passed without incident transitioning back into lush dark jungle again as both of them were beginning to feel tired. Terri helped Zani up on a tree where each of them tried to get comfortable in their own area of the crown after a deer dinner.

The next morning they were greeted by light in the distance, the mountains were in sight and in their foothills hung the sun that illuminated the land below. He woke Zani excitedly.

"Hey, wake up. looks were close! and the suns out too so in a few hours we'll probably get to have lunch that isn't more halfsmoked deer!"

Zani groaned groggily but nodded, stretching before Terri helped the wounded bird down the tree again for another multi-hour trek through the spirit wilds. Overall, this had been one of Terri's better trips along this path especially because no malicious spirits had harassed them on the way. So when they entered the normal jungle once again he felt especially happy with their progress. Slowly the plants became more scarce and were replaced by low shrubs and grasses as they hiked up a very steep hill towards the sun above.

His entire body felt drained and weak. His marathon of working and travelling had left strain even on a fit feline like him. He was beyond excited to finally find rest, even if just for a day, before he pursued his plans for vengeance again.

As they approached the top the tall earthen walls of the village came into view. surrounded by round plots of cultivated soil sprouting carrots and similar vegetables for the herbivores living here. Terri always admired the rabbits' discovery of selective breeding to improve plants over time. His tribe had never needed to invent this technique, the closest they got was having some tropical birds they bred for meat.

“Terri!”

The voice was unmistakable. Its full deep bass sound was burnt into his mind like his instinct to breathe. He turned his head towards the voice seeing Belloth coming from one of the fields where he had been working. He smiled and spread his arms wide to welcome them.

“I see you brought a girl from another tribe along. You should introduce us!”

“Hey big man, this is Zani and Zani, this is my friend Belloth.”

He said, returning the smile as the rabbit ushered them into the village gates carved from mighty mahogany trees.

“Pleased to meet you, Belloth.”

Said Zani. Terri wasn’t sure, but he could have sworn she was raising her feathers in excitement. Belloth seemed oblivious to this and patted Terri on the back.

“So have you come to trade, or simply partake in our next festival because you are early if that's the case.”

Terri shook his head as sorrow crept back into his eyes.

“No, not really. It's the village. My tribe… they...”

Trying to explain himself brought the events of the attack back to his mind. events he had suppressed and buried in the deepest wells of his memory to focus on survival. But now he was no longer trying to survive anymore. He was in a place where survival was assured and answers were expected. But the answers hurt. He felt like a dark orb was forming in his chest, pulling in with all its might, gripping his soul as his golden eyes began to fill with tears. The tomcat's legs grew unsteady when his mind flooded with the images of the burning rubble mixed with charred corpses buried in the debris.

“I-”

He tried to gather himself, to form a coherent sentence. But finally it all came pouring out as he fell to his knees and began openly weeping, body shaking with heavy sobs as the loss was finally allowed to fully wash over him. He took off his mask, trying to stem the tide of tears with his hands but it simply was too much.

Belloth quickly reacted, kneeling beside his friend to grab his shoulder, speaking in a calming tone.

"It's okay bud! whatever happened you'll be fine here."

The black rabbit hugged the tomcat whose crying seemed to also upset Zani, filling her with guilt as she uncomfortably shifted her weight and looked at Terri getting consoled by his friend.

It took a while for the cat to let all the grief flow out, but eventually he calmed down enough to wipe his eyes, they were now reddened and still wet.

"T-thank you Belloth"

He said with a shaky voice. Belloth helped him get up, letting the cat lean on him for support as the three entered the village walls. The interior of the village was surprisingly small. Zani looked around confused.

"Sorry to ask, but uh… is that all there is to your village? there's so many people in the fields and in here but there's only a handful of huts? Where does everybody sleep?"

"It's underground. We live in burrows thanks to our guardian spirit Errea who has blessed us with mastery of earth and stone"

He gestured at the village's walls with his free arm. They were indeed made from the earth itself, not piled on top like ordinary buildings would be. Instead they were made of the exact same earth and stone that the ground was made from like they had been forced up, raised by a spell that was unfamiliar to Zani.

Belloth led the two to the back of the village where a ramp led down, opening up into an impressive network of tunnels and caverns hollowed out by the same magic. It was as he had said, a village underground, lit by oil lamps and tallow candles, ventilated with small air shafts leading to the surface.

Finally they arrived at Belloth's home and he ushered them inside helping Terri to bed to rest. The tomcat passed out almost instantly he laid down on the furs and straw, the emotional and bodily exhaustion was simply too much for the cat. Belloth sat down at the hearth setting up a bowl of water and some leaves to make tea.

"Come on, Zani. Let's sit and talk."

He patted the ground and she nodded kneeling by the fire with the large rabbit.

"I won't ask Terri again for now but do you know what happened? Did he tell you?"

Zani nodded and began to recount the destruction of Terri's tribe at the hand of her people. Belloth sat in shock, mouth agape as he heard of the horrible fate of his friend.

"No wonder he's so shaken up I'd be in the same state if that happened to me."

He admitted, looking over at Terri with even deeper worry in his eyes before looking back at Zani.

"So do you know where your tribe will strike next?"

She shook her head

"Not really but it's very unlikely to be here. We scouts were sweeping in the other direction, so any targets in the near future will be even further away than Terri's village"

The exhale from Belloth's nose was filled with relief.

“Good. Now tell me why and how your tribe became this way. I understand why you left, but in my experience, good people don’t suddenly turn bloodthirsty over nothing.”

She sighed heavily, cupped the bowl of tea she was handed, and took a sip before opening her beak again.

"Right. I should probably explain… I have a brother, Zarkan. We were the shaman’s son and daughter. I went to become a hunter and scout while Zarkan had a calling in magic, being taught by our father to use the spirits' gifts for our tribe's benefit. He studied and became a brilliant shaman when our father passed. But something went wrong. He began to overindulge in the wind of destruction. It changed him. At first, he was more irritable and short-tempered, but over time he began wearing robes, hiding his body as he slowly changed into a monster. His irritability made him form a distaste for outsiders, saying horrible things about the people our tribe traded with. Eventually he began riling up the people, blaming every problem we had on outsiders. The people ate it up. They were eager to blame others for problems that they could have fixed themselves and were caused by themselves."

Belloth nodded.

“I see. I have heard of this from our shaman. Indulging too deeply in one form of magic without others to balance it out can lead to terrible consequences. It changes you. It seemed to have warped your brother.”

She sighed.

“Yes, whatever he is now, it's no longer my brother, it's made of fire and hate and fury and it riled up my tribe into lashing out at others, first at raiders and cannibals that attacked our traders. Those attacks were at least justifiable to some degree, we were defending ourselves by destroying the people bringing us misery. But with Terri’s tribe we crossed a line. Those cats did nothing to us. They were not even a tribe we had met before. They were just chosen arbitrarily for being in the path of the flock. We were passing by and casually bringing destruction on innocents. I did not participate. The idea of attacking a peaceful village and looting the burning ruins makes me sick.”

Belloth put an arm on her shoulder to show sympathy.

"That's noble. Not falling for your brother's hateful rhetoric was definitely the better path.”

He assured her before taking a sip of his own bowl of tea. After this conversation, the two spent the day and night talking, exchanging memories by the fire until they both also rested when the rest of the burrows fell quiet at night. The next morning came, Terri was the first to wake. Yawning and stretching on the furs.

He got up, looking over at Belloth and Zani sleeping in the other corners of the room on improvised fur beds with Zani receiving the nicer furs. He looked over to his right, seeing a bowl of cold tea and his mask sitting there. He drank the tea eagerly, trying to regain all the water he had lost weeping. Once the bowl was empty he reached for his mask. Normally he would have only worn it to festivals or to war but now it was the only part of his past he could hold onto, so wearing it gave him comfort.

He got up heading deeper into the familiar burrows. He knew his way around and headed to the deep spring that supplied the dens with fresh water. a gift from the tribe's guardian spirit, Errea. He took a few buckets full of the fresh water and filled a pit in a nearby room to create a bath to wash up in after stripping, cleaning the residue from his tears from his face. He felt good scrubbing his body although he would have liked some soaproot to truly get cleaned up. Either way, he felt better after crying,

sleeping, and washing up. He dried himself with a rag and got out and put his loincloth and mask back on, heading back up to Belloth's home, feeling refreshed and ready for today.

When he entered, Belloth was already up with Zani still sleeping as the rabbit was chopping carrots and other roots with a stone knife and tossing them in hot water to make a soup for breakfast. He smiled when Terri entered.

“Well you look much better now. If you need more time to recover, you can, if you're hungry you know where the meat is so take what you want.”

He nodded appreciatively and opened the clay jar in the corner filled with dried meats that Belloth kept in his home specifically for when Terri came over, knowing the cat's body could not subsist on his own vegetable diet for long. After taking a few strips Terri sat down by the fire.

“I guess she told you about everything?”

Belloth nodded

“I'm sorry I was not there to help.”

Terri made a dismissive gesture

“Do not bother yourself with that regret, even with both of us there it would have been a losing battle.”

The rabbit hesitated but ended up nodding in agreement, believing his friend's words.

“So why did Muiari not defend the village? Did she lose to the attackers’ guardian?”

Terri's disposition darkened again.

“No, Muiari is dead. They shot her with a waterstone arrow. It was the very start of the attack. They must have set their best archer on her to hit her from far away and through a window.”

Belloth lifted his hand to his mouth in shock.

“Stars above!”

He exclaimed in shock. The death of powerful spirits was uncommon, especially at the hands of mortals. Most people never attempted it because it was suicide to kill a tribes guardian without an tribe backing you up.

“This entire event is something we should bring to Errea, Zani told me her tribe was scouting further away for the moment but we don't know if they won't eventually circle back and find us here.”

Terri nodded affirmingly

“Yes once Zani wakes up and we've all eaten I think it is high time we talk to Errea”

He took a bite of the spiced jerky, chewing with a soft purr, enjoying the familiar flavor of the meat. Meanwhile, Belloth crushed garlic for the soup and Zani yawned as she got up.

“Hey”

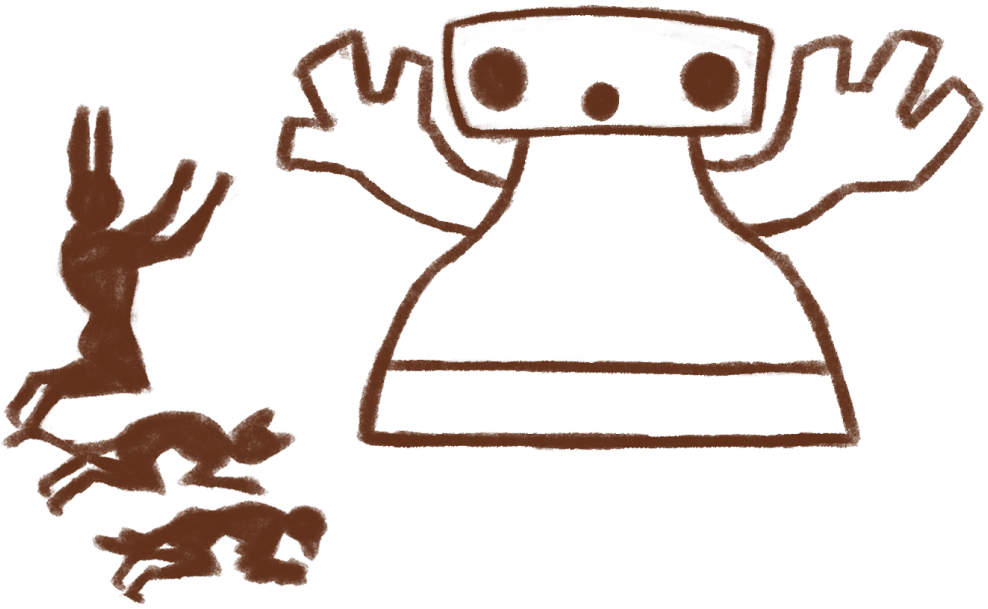
She groaned groggily as she sat down, staring at the soup on the hearth. They both greeted her back and Belloth filled 2 bowls with the vegetable soup, handing one to Zani who began blowing and sipping it eagerly as she slowly fully woke up.

After breakfast, Belloth got up, stretched his massive frame, and gestured for the others to follow him.

CHAPTER 4:

THE SCHEMEING

The holy ground of Belloth's tribe was the deepest point of the burrows, a massive cave with walls covered in paintings drawn by the rabbit tribe, depicting events from their history, great achievements, legends, and a wall of handprints where each member of the tribe had left their mark. In its center, on a pedestal of finely carved stone, sat Errea, the guardian spirit of the rabbits. Errea was made of translucent yellow light with a stout but large body. His face consisted of a white mask, like all guardian spirits. It was decorated with the same yellow patterns painted on Belloth and the other rabbits' fur and sported three perfectly circular holes serving as mouth and eyes.



All three of them knelt and bowed deeply to the spirit, touching their foreheads to the ground in reverence for the powerful being. Only Belloth lifted his head after the gesture, while Terri and Zani stayed prostrated before the guardian. The black rabbit began to speak.

"Mountain father, we children have come to bring grave news."

He announced in his bass voice. The large spirit nodded slowly in response.

“What grave news do you bring, son of earth?”

The voice of the spirit was low and rumbling, sounding even deeper than Belloth's own, like rocks grinding together.

“Our allies, the cats of the Verdant Basin, have been attacked. They were wiped out alongside their spirit. The attackers came from the sky wielding waterstone arrows and burned my friend's village to the ground”

The white mask leaned in closer although its expressionless features made it hard to see if it was in shock, curiosity or some other emotion.

“A tragedy for sure but why do you bring this news straight to me?”

Asked the spirit in its grinding-stone voice.

“Because the attack was unprovoked and the tribe of the attackers is still in the region. They could circle back to us and find our home.”

The spirit nodded slowly.

“So you come to pry secrets from me? To ask for new magics to protect yourselves?”

Terri shuddered. He knew that the only way to obtain new spells was to receive them from a spirit. Usually, in his tribe, only the shaman would do so. He had heard that spirits rarely like to part with their secrets so usually one had to argue with one to make a case for receiving new magical symbols. He had not expected to ever be present for such an exchange.

“Yes. I came to ask for advice and new magic. The attackers were birds, our great walls will not stop them with their ability to fly.”

The spirit’s mask tilted slightly.

“Why should I grant you magic for that when you have bows and spears that are perfectly fine for airborne foes?”

Terri realized he had points to add to make the case even more convincing.

“Excuse me, mountain father. It's not just that they fly, they also wield enchanted weapons. I killed one of their gatherers after the battle and even he carried a weapon with enchantments and a leather scroll of the spell used to charge it. I can even show it to you because I took it for myself.”

The spirit noticeably perked up.

“I see… that changes things. A tribe wielding a large number of enchanted weapons. I would rather not hand out such spells, but I see your point. However I will not grant you the secret to enchant more weapons or something to seal off the top of the village, those spells are beyond what mortals should be trusted with.”

Terri's heart sank at those words.

“But I admit I will have to give you another secret instead. So receive this new pair of sigils.”

The spirit lifted one of its glowing bulky arms and extended it forward to draw on the sand-covered floor of the cave. The three mortals watched with fascination as the spirit's limb traced two symbols in the sand.

"I grant you the ritual of the shell warrior."

The hand kept drawing, making a simple stick figure next to a larger figure. big enough to fit the stick figure inside it. He tapped the large figure.

"This is the shell warrior. Think of it as a large puppet you can sit inside."

He then tapped the stick figure.

"This is the puppeteer, a person bound by the spell. Once this person is bound to a shell warrior, the warrior will begin to move and obey the commands of its puppeteer when they sit inside it. If they leave the shell warrior, it will become lifeless again."

The spirit lifted a finger.

"Know these things, however. Firstly, the shell warrior is not a spirit. Do not worship it or make offerings to it. It is a weapon even if it moves like a living thing.

Secondly, I will not create a shell warrior for you. The materials you use to construct it will have to come from your efforts and so will the design.

Lastly, do not think this is a weapon of aggression. Shell warriors are mighty, but they are only to be used in defense, if you build one it will not be fast enough to cross the spirit wilds and even if you build one light enough to move quickly enough through the wilds it will be torn apart for being made of light, weak materials."

Terri's eyes went wide at this revelation of magic, awed by the mystical knowledge that the spirits guarded. He immediately committed the symbols to memory and bowed with the others once more.

"We thank you for your generous gift of magic mountain father!"

said Belloth before bowing, as the spirit nodded approvingly to the three mortals.

"Now go and build your shell warrior. I am certain it will be all you need to succeed in the case of an attack."

They immediately left the cave after being dismissed by the spirit, returning to the higher levels.

"Have you ever heard of these shell warriors before?"

asked Zani on the way up. Both men shook their heads.

"No, our spirit never revealed that spell, I think, but I do not know many spells our shaman had to begin with. Whatever he knew is now basically lost with him."

explained Terri who cursed himself for never trying to memorize the symbols in the magic circles when he attended any rituals. He knew it could have been valuable now to share his tribe's spells with Belloth's tribe.

"Either way, we will have to consult our shaman. She will know how to use these symbols and help us animate the shell warrior once we have the materials and built it"

said Belloth as he led the two to another part of the burrows. This time, the place they were led to had intricate paintings around the doorframe and a nice carved door that Belloth knocked on.

“Uraia, are you home?”

he asked through the door. For a second, it was silent before sounds could be heard, bowls tipping over, something bumping, and a curse. The door opened and they were faced by a surprisingly young shaman. She was a white rabbit painted the same way Belloth was, body decorated in bright yellow lines. She wore a grinning wooden mask that was slightly crooked, clearly put on hastily.

“Uh, yes, hi, I am here!”

she said quickly as she straightened her mask and reached for a shaman’s staff next to the door to complete her look.

“Hey, I am sorry to bother you and Koia, but I think for this we will need a master and student at once.”

Belloth recounted all events up until now and despite Uraia being masked Terri could tell from her eyes how she was cycling through emotions from shock to sadness to intrigue and when the new spells were mentioned he saw those blue eyes light up with a spark, a deep passionate fire that bordered on obsession.

“Oh that's incredible I'll wake master Koia and we will prepare the spell!”

She was almost vibrating with excitement and hurried off to another place.

“Is she always like that?”

asked Zani to which both Terri and Belloth nodded.

“Yeah, she was always very excitable about magic. No one was really surprised that she was training to become the next shaman and medicinewoman.”

Explained Belloth as they watched the shaman's apprentice running off. Zani gestured after her.

“So should we follow?”

“No, no, the old man will take a while to properly wake up and get ready. I think we should sit down and think about how to build this shell warrior but let us do that in my home.”

said Belloth, leading them back to his burrow where he grabbed a bowl of yellow paint and began drawing a rough humanoid shape on the wall.

“So where do we start?”

he asked them.

“Well, probably with the weaponry?”

suggested Zani and Terri nodded in agreement. Belloth gestured at his stone mace.

“How about a big hammer or mace?”

Terri shook his head.

“I get that you like those but it wouldn't work well against large numbers of flying enemies.”

“What about a bow?”

suggested Zani.

"Maybe? But making a lot of giant arrows might seriously bite into our time to prepare”

countered Belloth

“Then we should do something in between, a spear, it has a long range but doesn't require ammunition to secure a large space.”

“Decent basis, but our enemies would eventually slip through and kill the puppeteer inside.”

“Then we put some blade or claw in the other hand to fight off close attackers that got past the spear.”

suggested Belloth, drawing a spear in one hand and an axe in the other. Both Zani and Terri nodded.

“Great. Weapons are planned. Now we have to consider what we make it from. I'd say stone. Our best masons and toolmakers can shape it well.”

Zani shook her head again.

“Terrible idea. Remember what your guardian spirit said? Weight affects speed. If we make the whole thing from stone it would be tough but slow and easy for my tribe to outmaneuver. It needs to be nimble but not frail.”

Belloth frowned but nodded, admitting defeat in his idea of a fully stone shellwarrior.

“Then we could do wood. It is flexible and lighter than stone, I should know. My tribe built the entire village from wood.”

When Terri said ‘flexible,’ something lit up in Belloth’s yellow eyes.

“Oh wait, I have an idea!”

He bounced a few times on his powerful legs as if to demonstrate something.

“What if we make its legs springy so it can jump like my tribe? That would add even more range to fight birds!”

“And where do you propose we find wood that is springy?”

asked Terri, confused

“I’m surprised you don't remember. When we were boys, we found those large Dorga bones at the edge of the wilds remember? They were super bendy and springy.“

The tomcat's eyes lit up as he remembered.

"Oh right. But those are probably not there anymore. Where do you think we could get some?”

“The Dorgas are all hibernating right now, no? We can ambush one while it sleeps, kill it, and then take its bones.”

Terri hesitated.

“That… sounds really risky, especially with the birds nearby.”

“Can you two please stop talking about Dorgas like I know what that is?”

interjected Zani.

“Oh yeah if your tribe has never encountered them we are talking nonsense right now."

Belloth stood up and began painting something new on his cave wall: a large frog-like creature but it looked much meaner than a normal frog and was spitting something.

“They are basically large armored frogs except that their belly sac isn't there to make sound. Instead, that's where they keep acid to spit at creatures that violate their territory. Very aggressive and tough creatures. Big too. but its bones would be perfect for our shellwarrior.”

She lifted an eyebrow

“That sounds way too tough to kill. Wouldn’t

you need your entire tribe to take something like that down?”

Belloth shook his head in response.

“Not if it's drowsy and sleeping in its bog. If we take it by surprise we three could be enough, plus, I don't want to distract my tribe with this task. We are still recovering from a drought in these foothills and trying to refill our larders. We need all hands to work the fields”

Zani frowned.

“I don’t know. I mean, jumping high seems like a great thing but are you sure you have a plan to take one of those down?”

“I actually have something in mind, as carnivores my tribe had a lot of hunting tactics that don't involve fighting large prey directly.”

added Terri who was becoming more amicable to the idea of using Dorga bones. Soon agreement was struck and a plan was hatched to obtain Dorga bones, as they were the hardest material to get, with stone and wood both being plentiful.

CHAPTER 5:

THE GATHERING

The swamp Dorga was snoozing, half sunken in its marshy bed. The creature was huge even when half submerged, an imposing presence that other animals avoided even here in the spirit wilds, where nature was more violent.

The toad-like monstrosity did not wake as shadows meandered around at the edge of its bog, lurking in trees and watching it. All the creature did in those hours was shift slightly in its sleep. Its slumber was dreamless and ended suddenly when a large tree trunk came crashing down squarely on its head, cracking bone and waking the creature with a painful jolt.

At the edge of the water, Terri, Belloth and Zani stood ready, perched in trees to see if their method of lifting a tree trunk with ropes and levers before cutting it loose would kill the animal in a single impact. It had taken them hours to cut the tree and then drag it here. Unfortunately even with Belloth's strength they had been limited by their combined effort in how large a tree trunk they could use.

Terri gripped his spear tightly, ready to dodge if the creature noticed them. It seemed badly hurt, lumbering out of the water with a large purple bruise and bleeding gash on its armored head. They had clearly done damage and disoriented the Dorga, but also enraged it, its wet yellow eyes scanned for what could have hit it with that log, smelling the unfamiliar scents in the air as it looked around.

Luckily for them the animal had not yet noticed them sitting in the trees above. Terri made hand gestures to Zani and Belloth signaling them to wait as the Dorga wandered below. They had planned for such a case and brought fire in the form of a torch. Zani held it in one hand while her other grasped a stone axe.

The plan was simple, albeit risky. When the monstrous toad moved under their trees they leapt down, landing on its hard, armored back. The creature's confusion and anger erupted as it bucked wildly, trying to get the smaller creatures off its back but they held on. Belloth grasped a spike, Terri pinned himself to the creature by ramming his spear into a gap in the armor plates and Zani held on by slamming her stone axe blade into a more fleshy part of the animal as it roared and croaked.

The Dorga’s movement was erratic but not as violent as it would have been if it had not already been so hurt. It spat acid, making nearby foliage and trees sizzle as they began to corrode on the spot.

By climbing onto its back they could avoid its lethal acid torrents. Terri and Belloth began doing their part bashing and stabbing into the creature’s back with mace and spear to irritate and bleed it out while

Zani pulled herself toward the creature's front while cursing the fact that her arm was still wounded making her unable to fly. This could have been much easier if she had the ability again.

Once she reached the bruised and bleeding forehead she waited for the right moment holding on for dear life so she would not be thrown off while one hand clutched the axe and the other the torch.

She had originally proposed shooting burning arrows but seeing the range of the Dorga's acid spit made her grateful Terri and Belloth had voted down that idea. Now she was hanging here waiting for the creature to open its huge mouth. The moment it did, croaking in pain as Terri stabbed its spine she tossed the torch in from above, prompting a strange sound from the animal.

"Jump now!"

She yelled, prompting everyone to bail from the Dorga's back, rolling off into the slimy moss on the ground as the beast groaned before suddenly its belly and throat sac burst open on a bright fireball as the torch in its throat ignited the flammable gases created by its acid. The flame had flowed backwards into its acid sac and ignited it, expanding and evaporating the liquid.

The explosion was violent but effective, sending gore and armor fragments into the acid-drenched landscape before the Dorga, leaving a gaping hole in its underside. It finally ceased movement and slumped to the ground, dead.

All three of them rolled onto their backs, bodies covered in the swamp's slimy water and the Dorga's blood as they breathed heavily for a moment. Eventually the endorphins of victory flooded them, prompting Belloth to laugh followed by the other two, delighted by the relatively clean kill of something this big with only three people involved. It was certainly a task worthy of being commemorated on a cave wall somewhere in Belloth's village.

The world felt light and each of them felt taller and stronger for a while as they reveled in the kill and its scale while they rested their bodies in the cool grass and moss.

After the laughter died down they got up feeling exhausted but accomplished. Unfortunately for them the work was not yet done. They began hacking into the animal, slicing it with Zani's axe and some obsidian knives. It took hours to loosen the plates on the animal's legs and carve through its thick muscles. Extracting the bones from the legs was hard work and took them at least two more hours. Once they had 2 large bloody bones laid out Belloth noticed something in the creature's forehead.

It was cracked in a way that made bone visible just below the surface, not a fragment long enough for a limb but the shape is what captured the rabbits attention. To the others' confusion he reached for his bloodied stone mace and began swinging at the Dorga's forehead.

"Uh, it's already dead bud."

said Terri, confused, watching the rabbit beating on the Dorga's skull until the bone came loose, falling to the rabbit's feet. He lifted it up and smiled at them.

He was holding the spiked ridge of the animal's brow. It was about as long as his arm and sported two distinct spikes at its end.

"I think this could work well as our shellwarriors second weapon, no? It's roughly axe shaped but instead of having a stone blade it's spiked!"

Zani's and Terri's eyes gleamed with recognition of the clever idea. It would certainly save time to not have to knap 2 oversized stone blades so neither of them protested Belloth's idea when they began using ropes and some hides they had brought to tie all 3 bones together. Forming a heavy bundle they began dragging through the spirit wilds on a wooden sled and back to Belloth's village as fast as they could. They knew that without the Dorga here this area would soon be swarming with animals attracted by the scent of blood.

Another two hours later they arrived, drawing much attention as they dragged 3 big bloody bones into the village. Terri felt a bit bad for not taking everything they could from the Dorga, he knew it was wasteful but they simply lacked the manpower and time to take apart its entire body even if they had discarded its toxic meat.

Soon, a crowd had formed around the bones and the bloodied trio, who were untying their prize while they got bombarded with questions. They did their best to respond and explain but there simply was too much interest. What saved them from this onslaught eventually was Uraia and her teacher parting the crowd as they made space for the shaman and his apprentice who had come to inspect the first materials.

Master Koia was a gray rabbit, wizened and frail. Despite his appearance however his voice commanded silence and attention from the crowd as he spoke surprisingly loudly

"Let them be brothers and sisters. Return to your work and leave them to theirs, the mountain father has given one of his gifts to us and in due time you will see this gift take shape if you let these three do their work and help them if they need your assistance!"

The shaman's word was clearly final as people nodded understandingly and returned to their tasks glancing over curiously from time to time. Meanwhile the old rabbit turned back to them.

“I see you already are gathering materials, good. I am not quite sure what these bones are for but I'll trust in Belloth's judgement.”

He said as he patted the large black rabbit on the back in a friendly manner. Belloth smiled in return.

“Thank you Koia, we will do our best to gather these materials and assemble the shellwarrior. When the time is right we'll approach you for the ritual to give it life. In the meantime we won't bother you or your student.”

Koia chuckled.

“I can make no such promises on her part. I'm fairly certain she will be all over this project whether you want her or not she's way too excited about this.”

the shaman gestured at the young white rabbit with his staff. She was helping Terri with cleaning the blood off the bones and chatting enthusiastically.

“I see well having your student around will probably help. After all none of us know the winds of magic.”

The old rabbit nodded

“Well I will leave you young ones to your work then.”

He simply turned away, leaving the four of them to clean the bones. It took half a day to get all of the blood and gore off them and lay them out in the sun to bleach naturally.

“Stars above I'm hungry!”

Said Belloth as he stretched and Terri chimed in.

“Seconded, let's grab a bite.”

The other two also nodded in agreement. They grabbed their weapons that were lying nearby, laid aside when they had begun their work of cleaning. When Terri picked up his spear Uraia noticed the magical symbols carved in its shaft. Her eyes lit up immediately and moved closer.

“Oh, you have an enchanted weapon?! Can I see?!”

He nodded and handed over the spear for her to inspect. She grasped it like a kitten reaching for a juicy fish brought by its mother, almost ripping it from Terri’s hands.

“I had planned to show it to you or your teacher anyway since I don't know what the symbols mean. I’m not even sure what these spells do.”

she nodded eagerly and inspected the carved symbols.

“Do you know what circle charges these or did you get this weapon without its circle?”

She asked.

“I have a leather scroll with the circle burnt in. I can show it to you.”

He reached into his bag once they arrived at Belloth's home to eat. He unrolled it and showed it to her as they sat to eat. She inspected it having completely forgotten about her own hunger as she studied the symbols and their arrangement, eyes bright with the spark of a sharp mind that bordered on genius as she drew from her obsessively collected knowledge of magic. She spoke as she analyzed.

“These correspond to two winds of magic, destruction and control.”

She had to think for a moment.

“These are only partially known to me. I can tell the control one is agony. It makes the weapon hurt more when it strikes, very good for keeping the prey in check and weak. Its fuel is thorns.”

He nodded, making a mental note to collect thorns whenever he could in the future to charge his weapon with.

"The other…. is harder for me to pinpoint. I think I've seen it before, used by travelers. Do you notice any effects when using this weapon besides your prey being in more pain?"

He thought for a moment and nodded

"Yes, I felt strangely invigorated and refreshed when striking something. Could that be it?"

Her eyes sparked with another flash of insight and she nodded quickly.

"Leeching, your spear will heal wounds, a powerful and rare spell. I'll admit I only managed to learn about it by stealing from the traveler I saw using it."

Belloth frowned and narrowed his brow.

"Shameful, a child of the mountain should not steal from guests!"

He scolded, making Uraia lay back her long white ears as she bowed her head in shame.

"I know, but knowing more about new spells will benefit the tribe."

She argued

"That might be what you want me to think but we both know your reasoning was mostly based on curiosity. I know you too well. Having to know was more urgent than respecting a guest"

Belloth had clearly struck a nerve because the shaman-in-training went quiet, clearly ashamed. She handed back the spear to Terri sheepishly.

"Your second enchantment is powered by leeches"

She said quietly before going completely quiet and gnawing on a cooked starchy root while averting her eyes from Belloth, who eyed her with disdain for breaking one of his tribe's hospitality rules.

Both Terri and Zani kept quiet too, noticing the dour mood that had spread in Belloth's burrow now. They all left after everyone was done eating in silence, heading to the deeper parts of the village, following Belloth who led them to areas that were still visibly being excavated to make deeper burrows.

They had agreed already that after the bones they would be sourcing stone for the shellwarrior and with a shaman along it would be easier work. They stopped at a wall mostly composed of a gray stone that was hard to work. Something that broke many stone picks and usually only yielded to magic.

"I assume you want me to get some stone for you all?"

Asked Uraia, speaking for the first time since Belloth had scolded her.

"Yes we need quite a lot of this for the limbs."

Said Zani who was glad they finally broke the uncomfortable silence. The white rabbit nodded and opened her bag, pulling out a white stone that stained the bag as it was pulled out. Terri recognized it as chalk. She knelt down and began drawing out a large circle, placing various symbols along its sides and inside it.

The other 3 had no idea what the signs meant but waited patiently for her to finish the circle. She then got up and scraped a clump of clay-like earth from a part higher up in the tunnels, coming back to drop a fistful of the clay on a specific symbol in the circle.

“That's the fuel dealt with now all we need is spiritual fuel.”

“That’s where someone has to do some action in the circle right? like sacrificing an animal?”

Asked Zani. The white rabbit nodded in response.

“Yes but we won't be sacrificing anything here. Each wind of magic can be powered by different spiritual fuels alongside its physical fuel. The spell I’ve drawn out here is the wall spell but I modified it to pull blocks of stone from the wall. It is within the wind of control so its fuel is quite unsavory. A lot of grim deeds I'd rather not name or commit. The best we can do is inflicting pain, a fuel that works for both destruction and control spells.”

She gestured at Terri's spear that he had absentmindedly carried down here.

“We already have a tool that can inflict great pain even when it does little damage, so that's good. Unfortunately the power we need here can't be satisfied by just hurting a wild animal in the circle, it will have to be one of us.”

“Damn and there's no better fuel than hurting someone here with my spear?”

Asked Terri while looking at his weapon.

“Unless you want to do something far more cruel and disgusting like forcing yourself on me or Zani, I'd advise we stick to pain.”

She said this firmly, making it clear that this was the least horrible and most practical choice.

“Well then at least Zani should be the one using it to heal her arm.”

He proposed handing the spear to the bird whose arm was still bandaged and not fully healed from the Swiftclaw’s bite. Zani nodded and received the spear.

“So who volunteers to be cut?”

Belloth stepped forward into the circle.

“I can take it.”

He declared, showing his usual stoic dedication to bearing the brunt in favor of others. Uraia nodded and entered the circle too standing on another symbol as she knelt.

“I will start chanting. You have to cut Belloth and keep him in pain until that pile of clay is entirely consumed”

Zani nodded and pressed the obsidian tip of the spear against Belloth's wide black chest. Resting it between two of the yellow lines decorating his body. Uraia began chanting to a rhythm she could hear in her head. The clay began to glow and slowly disintegrate into nothing, melting away from the top.

Belloth screamed as the obsidian cut his sternum, slowly dragging down his chest. The large rabbit usually deemed himself quite tough but his friend's spear was a kind of pain he was not prepared to cope with. It took all his will to not recoil from the blade as the clay melted away.

Terri stared with both horror and fascination as he realized the pain he could inflict with his spear. He had only used it on animals so far, so seeing a person react to it gave him a grotesquely clear picture of how much his weapon hurt.

Meanwhile Zani experienced a similar shock along with the relief of warm healing washing through her arm, mending the bite until only pristine reddish brown feathers remained where the wound had been.

Finally the clay completely disappeared and Zani immediately pulled the spear from the rabbit's bleeding chest. A clean red line ran down his front and he gasped with relief when the weapon was removed.

Suddenly, a loud thump drew their attention as four large blocks of stone slammed to the ground behind the circle. They had been so distracted by the ritual that they hadn't even looked at its effects. The blocks were perfectly smooth rectangles, cut cleanly from the wall by magic and deposited on the ground, ready for carving.

Belloth clutched his chest and grimaced at Terri.

“You found a nasty fucking weapon out there bud. That hurt so bad!”

The cat felt bad for what his spear had done to his friend but knew it would be necessary to build the shellwarrior and protect the rabbit tribe.

“Sorry man. Let’s get you patched up before we lug the stones back to the surface for carving.”

Belloth nodded while Zani unwrapped her bandage, admiring her healed arm as she unfolded her wing feathers, flapping her arms to test if they would let her fly again. Meanwhile, Uraia erased the chalk lines with her palm to ensure no one would accidentally tamper with a magic circle they did not understand, she then grabbed some bandages from her bag.

Being both healer and shaman allowed her to care for Belloth's wound fairly quickly, leaving his chest bandaged up after she had chewed up and applied a salve made from healing herbs she always carried with her.

He nodded to express his gratitude. He was still angry with her for stealing from a guest but being treated by her softened his temper for now.

“We’ll need some round logs and ropes to get these back to the surface unless Uraia here knows a spell to make them float.”

Terri said this to which Uraia shook her head.

“Unfortunately I don’t know any spell like that. If it exists only the Mountainfather or another tribe's shaman can reveal it.”

They nodded and Terri hurried off to fetch some ropes, a pole and logs while Uraia left to return to the surface since her work was done here. While they waited Zani could not help but stare at the bandage over Belloth's broad chest.

“I, uh, I’m sorry you got hurt”

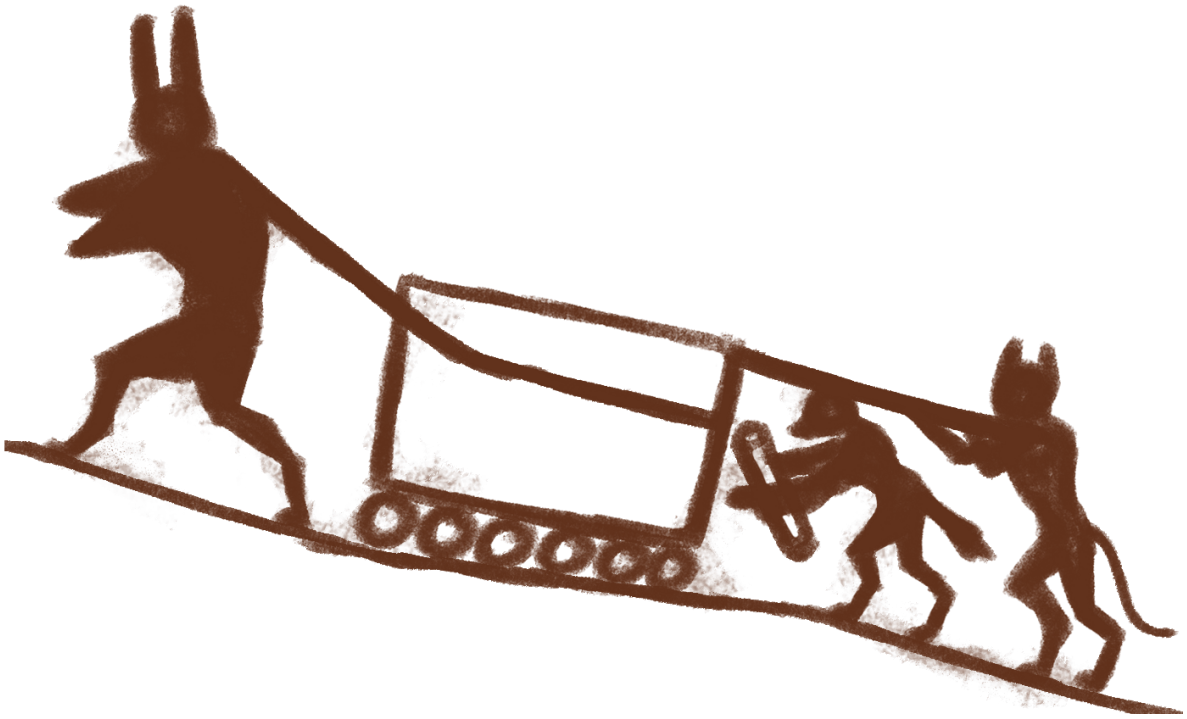
She said as she looked up into his yellow eyes.

“I don't mind, I'm used to discomfort, it's how I help. If there's hard work to be done I'd rather do it than let others struggle.”

The bird smiled softly.

“That’s very noble, Belloth. I see you're not just physically strong.”

There was a tone of admiration but Belloth had already noticed her demeanor toward him. Their moment was interrupted when Terri returned laden with ropes and wood.



The moment had passed so now they got busy tying the blocks of stone together on a bed of round logs. Belloth got in front to pull by the ropes while Terri stationed himself in the back to push and guide the blocks with a sturdy wooden pole while Zani continually moved the round logs in front of the block so they could roll uphill more easily. Within the hour one of Belloth's tribe's best toolmakers eagerly assisted in carving them.

The process of fashioning the shell warriors body was a hard task, taking them and a few other people a combined month to finish. Time that was spent carving, tying rope, knapping stone and building the device's oversized weaponry. Every tool the tribe had was used from the most basic stone hatchets to the most intricately woven rope. Unfortunately for Terri, even this month of work did not help him cope much; he still found himself crying at night when the memories flooded back in. On some especially hard days Terri sometimes just felt grief overcoming him, causing him to wail in anguish in the middle of whatever task he was doing forcing him to pause to cry until he felt better.

The worst instance came when they burned out a large log to create a hollow for the puppeteer to sit in. The strong scent of burnt wood was overwhelming. It was stronger than a torch or campfire. It struck the tomcat too close to home, causing him to collapse into his worst fit of open weeping. Belloth, Zani and some of the other members of Belloth's tribe tried to accommodate the grieving cat as best they could while continuing their work on the shell warrior. It became a constant balance between care and Terri's self-control.

But in the end their creation was complete and laid out for all to see. Bone legs and wooden arms bore impressive weapons, with thighs and upper arms carved from stone. The chest was made from a burned out and carved tree trunk shaped in the same manner one would make a boat. The head was a dome of woven branches, bent with steam and raw strength.

It looked quite impressive, although still lifeless, as Terri, Belloth, Uraia and Zani stepped back to admire their creation.

CHAPTER 6:

THE SEEKING

"You have done great work here. This shell warrior looks magnificent but now we have to consult the Mountainfather again. Without knowing what fuel the spell needs, the signs you were given are useless."

The old shaman, Koia, explained.

"I assume this spell will be within the wind of control, so for your spiritual fuel pain will suffice. The more, the better."

He elaborated.

"For your material fuel you must seek the mountain father's guidance."

The old rabbit had come when he heard the news of the shell warrior's completion. He was clearly impressed with the craftsmanship.

"Yes shaman we will definitely seek his counsel but before we do I have a request."

Zani said as she stepped forward from the group.

"I'm very grateful for your tribe's hospitality. You've tolerated my presence despite my tribe destroying your neighbors and allies. In no small part probably because Terri vouched for me. So I'd like to repay this kindness… I was hoping to volunteer to puppeteer the shell warrior when the time comes to fend off my tribe. Knowing my own people's tactics well will be my way of repaying my debt to you in combat"

The old shaman wrinkled his forehead in thought.

"Perhaps. I will hold council with the other elders about this. I would be in favor of letting you join us as a full member of the tribe but I do not make such decisions alone."

He said with a nod.

"But now hurry to the inner holy, if your tribe is truly as brutal as you and Terri describe we should prepare ourselves in case they find us."

The four of them nodded and hurried down into the depths of the burrows to the large painted cave of Errea the Mountainfather. They found him on his plinth as always, his wide spectral body splayed across it as his broad head turned towards them.

All four mortals prostrated themselves before the spirit in worship. Uraia was the one to speak since as a shaman she was the most qualified in the group to address the guardian spirit in matters of magic.

“Mighty Mountainfather we come for counsel. You have given us the signs of the shell warrior spell but the warrior is now complete and we still lack the knowledge of what fuel powers this spell. So we come to ask for this wisdom.”

She lowered her head again when she was done speaking.

“You have done well, my children. I have perceived your work. Your creation is formidable and deserves the tribe's colors. Of course I will reveal the fuel you need for this spell.”

His arm once again elongated and began drawing on the floor of the cave.

He drew an oblong, squared oval shape and tapped it

“You must seek out firestone, melt it, and refine it as much as you can. About a head sized block of it would suffice to breathe life into your shellwarrior and bind it to its pilot.”

Terri, Belloth and Zani looked confused. They had never heard of firestone. But Uraia gave a knowing nod.

“My mountain, unfortunately, does not bear the gift of firestone in its heart. instead, I advise you to head towards the former cat village.

Go further beyond for ten more days. you will find a wound in the earth, a large, perfectly round chasm. a place where a crime was committed long ago. In the walls of this chasm you will find it. But beware if you should fall in, you will cease to be. There will not even be a body left to take home.”

At the end the spirit's grinding stone voice was laden with foreboding and a sense of warning. He clearly meant it when he described the danger of the chasm. They all nodded to signal their understanding.

“Thank you for your gifts of knowledge. We will no longer disturb you.”

Said Uraia before they all retreated from the holy place, heading back into the burrow tunnels.

“So, uh, what is Firestone exactly? Is it a magical stone like waterstone?”

Terri was the first to ask once they had left. Uraia sighed.

“It's something taught to us shamans. I have never held any but it is a very special stone. It is orange and shiny once you scratch off the green layer on it. Skilled craftsmen can melt it and turn it into tools and other things. A very powerful material, better than flint or obsidian for things like blades and tools and when you throw it in fire it works a special magic that makes the flames green.“

“Wow, no wonder that is knowledge for shamans. That stuff sounds very magical!”

Said Belloth with amazement in his tone.

“So I guess we should gear up and move out then.”

Suggested Zani, but Uraia shook her head.

“You can but I have to stay. My education as a shaman is coming to an end and my final trials will be very soon. I have to stay and be tested by the Mountainfather.”

Belloth frowned.

“Damn so you're sending us to get a magic stone and are not even coming along to help with magic? That's unfortunate.”

“It really is but Firestone should be safe to carry even if you don't know magic. Just bring a sturdy tool to dig it up.”

Responded Uraia. Belloth nodded.

“Alright then we'll be off today, take care Uraia and I hope that when we return you'll be the tribe's new shaman.”

He said as Uraia parted ways with them and they headed back to gather up supplies, packing rations, weapons, tools, furs and everything else they might need for this long trip.

Opening his travel pack made Terri remember about the two waterstones he had brought with him over a month ago when he had arrived here.

“Hey, do you think I could borrow some handles and glue from the toolmakers?”

He asked Belloth as he held up the two stones.

“I think I could make two knives from these. I would have done it sooner but I forgot I had them.”

“That is good thinking, having weapons that can harm evil spirits is a great idea!”

Responded the brawny rabbit.

“I’ll go. I need to head to their workshop anyway since I didn't make my own weapons yet.”

Interjected Zani before leaving Belloth's home to grab what Terri needed and some equipment for herself. She returned with the parts as well as a bow with stone tipped arrows, a quiver and two stone daggers at her hips.

“Feels good to be carrying my favorites again instead of that junky sword you found me with. Fuck Zarkan for not letting me keep my own weapons”

Once again the mention of her brother's name drove poison into her words, making her demeanor more grim than usual.

“I guess if we meet Zarkan on the way I will hit him over the head till he gives those back.”

Joked Belloth to lighten the mood.and it seemed to work teasing a slight smile from Zani as she packed. Meanwhile Terri carried their waterskins down to the village's spring to fill them for the journey. He had taken inventory during packing, paying attention to what everyone had put in their bags.

Belloth's bag was the heaviest. holding thirty meters of rope, a stone pick, flint knife, a stone hammer as well as roots and vegetables as rations. With his two-handed mace added on top he was carrying the heaviest load by far.

Zani had packed the lightest bag since she needed a light pack to still be able to fly if needed. Her bag contained her dried fruit and seeds, needle and string, a stone axe and three woven mats. With her bow, quiver and daggers she was not remotely as encumbered as Belloth was.

And finally his own bag contained the leather scroll for charging his weapons enchantments, the 2 waterstones, 2 deer tines, string, glue, 2 knife handles, a flint knife and the dried meats he had been living on for the past month thanks to his friend having quite the large stockpile for his visits.

The only things that were shared among all their backpacks were their sleeping furs and chunks of pyrite and flint for starting quick fires, even if they got separated.

All in all they had packed well for their trip as long as they didn't encounter any overwhelming threats so when Terri returned with the full waterbags and they headed out he felt fairly positive about their odds.

The initial trip down the foothills of the mountain was pleasant, with a gentle breeze playing with their loincloths and fur as they descended towards the edge of the sunlight to enter into the twilight of the spirit wilds.

The thicket around them darkened being at first plunged into twilight and then the perpetual night of the spirit wilds when they left daylight behind to trek across dark jungle for days on end. Sleeping in the spirit wilds was a question of your inner timing rather than watching the sky go dark as the sun dimmed. So the group simply made camp when they felt tired, setting up a small fire and building 3 lean-tos from their furs, the woven mats and some branches and sticks nearby.

Once the camp was set up they gathered around the flames to eat together and after the meal Terri grabbed a stone that fit his hand nicely and sat down cross-legged, striking one of the waterstones he had brought making blue iridescent flakes fly off it gleaming wondrously in the light.

He was tired from marching through the rainforest all day but was determined to make at least one of the two blades he had planned to make. So he sat and worked the beautiful stone, slowly chipping it into a knifeshape while pocketing any larger splinters for future use in arrowheads.

He didn't have the skill of a professional toolmaker who knew stone knapping well but he was decent enough to fashion a sharp edge that he then serrated with one of the antler tines to make it more imposing.

Once that was done he placed a rock over the fire to heat up, this time not for cooking but for melting the black clump of glue into a usable liquid state which he then smeared on the base of the blade before fitting it into one of the knife handles he had brought along. He then wrapped the connection point in twine and rubbed even more glue into those fibers before setting it aside to cool down and harden.

Meanwhile, Belloth and Zani played a simple game involving loose stones and a crude grid drawn in the sand while Terri worked on the blade. Once it was done, he took a swig from his waterbag and lay down on his furs under his lean-to to sleep. When the game concluded, the rabbit and bird followed suit, getting comfortable on their sleeping furs as well.

When they all awoke hours later, the sky had not changed, remaining just as dark and still covered in the many constellations that decorated the firmament.

They packed up the camp quickly. Terri fastened the newly made waterstone knife to the belt holding his loincloth in place, feeling much safer now that he carried something that could actually harm the malicious spirits they might encounter.

They resumed their march, keeping quiet so as not to draw the attention of beasts or specters, until Terri's keen feline eyes spotted movement in distant ferns. He extended his arms wordlessly, telling his companions to stop. They all held still, squinting while both rabbit and cat lifted their ears, pivoting them in different directions to detect sounds and their sources. Belloth had the edge in this of course with his large rabbit ears being the most sensitive of the party, matching Terri's eyesight in sharpness. The large rabbit whispered,

“Big, four legs, left, many”

They turned their full attention to the shrubbery rustling to the left until finally something emerged . Unlike the swiftclaws Zani and Terri had fought on their way, these creatures moved slowly. They were large, with bodies low to the ground, moving on tree-trunk-like legs, their bodies covered in thick natural armor. They moved in a small herd slowly passing the travellers, eyeing them suspiciously. Another kind of large lizard, one Terri was familiar with. Any child could have recognized these animals.

They were clubtail lizards, peaceful grazers that were heavily armored and sported imposing clubs on the ends of their tails, which they could swing with such force that they could break larger predators' bones. Despite their natural armor, herd tactics, and weapons, the clubtails were harmless, as they did not deem the two-legged figures a threat.

The herd simply passed by and Belloth bowed his head in reverence. To his tribe the clubtails were holy animals similar to how Terri’s tribe deemed the longneck lizards holy.

Zani, for her part, had only seen clubtails once and simply enjoyed their peaceful majesty from a safe distance with Terri and Belloth. The animals' backs were at the travellers' eye level, and those clubs could have easily crushed their bodies to pulp, so remaining still and passive until the herd had passed was the safest option.

Once the herd had passed, they ventured onwards, crossing the path of crushed ferns, roots, and moss the clubtails had torn through. They kept moving towards Terri's old village. The thought of returning had weighed heavily on the tomcat's mind ever since they had departed from the mountain yesterday. Each day they drew closer to what had once been his home, that weight in his chest grew. That black, clawing hole, which felt like he could fall into himself, grew heavier with each step, threatening another breakdown, another wail of sadness that would endanger him and the others. So he tried to keep those feelings bottled up, to press down his grief, enclosing it in an armored shell like that of the clubtails. The others were unaware of how hard the tomcat was struggling, although they still worried about how he would react when they had to cross the ruins of his village.

Later, after setting up camp, Terri did not work on the second knife after eating his cured meats. Instead he headed straight for his sleeping furs, resting way before the others to quiet the thoughts in his head. He fell asleep quickly and thankfully had no dreams. He preferred it that way. The tomcat had started to hate dreams, even the ones that weren't nightmares.

Sometimes Terri dreamt he was back in the village and everyone was fine, the attack had never happened, and he was enjoying a feast with his tribe. Those dreams hurt the most when waking up because the comfort of community was ripped away all over again.

That morning they headed out earlier than usual to make sure they would pass Terri's village before it was time to rest again, Belloth and Zani knew how heavy this would be for Terri and did not want to make camp near the burnt remnants unless absolutely necessary. The only stop that was made that day was by a river to refill on water, other than that it was a silent march towards the ruins.

When the burnt trees, with the giant piles of charred wood and bones at their bases, came into view, Belloth looked over at Terri with concern, noticing his steps growing slower and his walk shaky, like a newborn deer taking its first steps, until he could only watch as his friend finally collapsed to his knees, burying his face in the grass as he began sobbing.

Belloth had seen this before. Terri had been struggling with similar moments the entire last month. He didn't hold it against the cat and knelt down to comfort him while silently gesturing to the worried Zani to search the perimeter to make sure Terri's wailing and sobbing wasn't attracting anything dangerous to their position.

Zani understood immediately and took off with a silent nod spreading her arms to take flight, lifting her light slender body off the ground with the powerful beat of her wing feathers as they unfolded from her arms. Belloth couldn't help but notice the grace and splendor of Zani's reddish-brown feathers unfurling. Even in the dim light of the spirit wilds she looked beautiful with her wings spread wide as she rose above.

Her initial flight was shaky and uncertain making sure that her previously injured arm was still functional but once she was sure it was fine her flight became steady. Strong wingbeats let her rise above the crying cat and kneeling rabbit and glided in a wide circle to keep watch. Unfortunately it was hard to see far even over the treetops as a thick blanket of fog had rolled in ever since they had woken up, making long-distance vision difficult.

First she of course noticed the burnt trees and piles of charred wreckage and bone. Next she spotted what remained of Terri's improvised camp that had been erected in the days before the sun had left this area and returned to the sky. She saw his collapsed lean to the burnt-out fire, a cracked cooking stone and the skeleton of a deer. All signs of Terri's hasty preparations to head into the spirit wilds with nothing to his name.

Most noteworthy to her however were two things. The first was the gleam of blue stones piled up by the fire. She knew what piles of waterstone looked like since her tribe had gathered a lot before they started their rampage across the land. The second she noticed the source of the waterstones. Even after over a month of decay and scavenging by wildlife, she could tell the corpse by the campsite was a fellow bird of her tribe.

She landed to inspect the corpse to see if it was someone she knew personally but the color of the mostly rotted feathers and the sunken face shape was not familiar to her. Whoever Terri had killed and taken the waterstones from it was not anyone she had a connection with, allowing her to dismiss the dead bird with relative ease. She felt bad for them of course but still placed the blame for their death at their own choices for remaining with the tribe.

She had little empathy for the corpse and turned her attention to the pile picking up some of the waterstones. She could tell they were valuable, if they took them for trading along the way they would be well supplied for any trades they wanted to make on their journey.

She returned to Belloth and Terri on foot. By now the cat had taken off his wooden mask to dry his tears with his arm while Belloth held a calming hand on his shoulder. The tomcat seemed to have calmed down enough to speak again.

"I see you found those waterstones i left here, s-sorry about that bird"

He said in between soft sobs, trying to calm himself by starting conversation.

She shrugged dismissively.

"He knew what he was doing. Do not feel bad for killing him. I see that he had a large amount of waterstone when you got him and you left most of it here."

He nodded.

"Y-yeah my bag was too full of meat to take more than two"

He explained.

"Do you think you can carry some of this big boy? it'd be great for bartering"

She asked Belloth.

"Of course but keep in mind we probably can't take too much, even I have my limits and being too heavily loaded in the spirit wilds can be a death sentence."

She made an affirming handgesture and tossed the rabbit the two stones she had been holding before leaving and returning with two more. She tossed each of the men a stone.

"Let us take four just in case, Terri can carry one and you can take the rest."

Terri took the stone and stashed it in his bag and Belloth did the same, ready to move on from the ruins and back into the thicker areas of the wilds. They kept going while Terri put his mask back on and averted his eyes from the black remains, being the first to re-enter the thick brush, eager to get away from this traumatic location.

To their misfortune the moment Terri entered the thicker vegetation they all heard it, a screech followed by a volley of words shouted in a language Belloth and Terri could not understand but Zani very much could. Her eyes widened as she looked up and saw four figures soaring across the dark sky above, blocking out the stars as they passed overhead.

“Quick, they spotted us! if we run deeper in the brush we can lose them!”

She urged, ushering Belloth into the greenery hoping that those scouts would lose them in the vegetation. The cat and rabbit didn't ask questions and immediately started running while they all could hear the sound of four landing bodies behind followed by more yelling and footsteps chasing after them.

The bird scouts were hot on their tails, chasing them with stubborn determination while Belloth, Zani and Terri tried their best to shake them off, vaulting over fallen trees, taking random turns and such to try and throw off the pursuers.

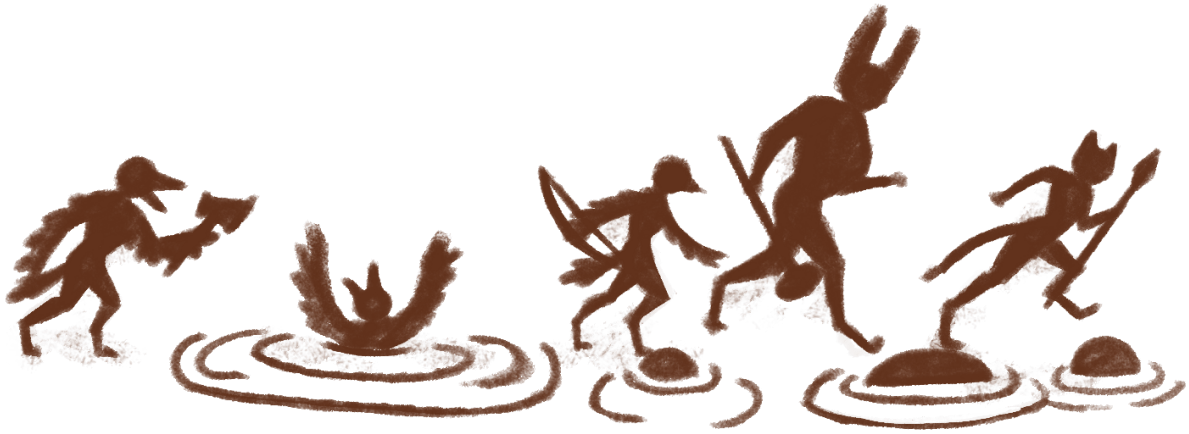
It did not work. Soon the birds were gaining on them, drawing closer as Terri formed an idea.

“I know where we can lose them, but you have to follow my lead exactly!”

he warned them.

“Sure, let's go, I think I know what your plan is!”

Responded Belloth as Terri took a sharp turn using his familiarity with the spirit wilds around his village to their advantage. Zani trusted Belloth and Terri’s mystery plan and followed close behind as they ran toward the river that crossed through the entire basin that Terri's and Belloth's villages shared. Soon the ground became softer and eventually marshy with wet silt and sand making up a waterlogged plain where the sturdy tall trees of the forest were replaced by gangly mangroves with arching roots digging deep into the watery soil while their thick tops blocked out the sky.



Terri began hopping between specific patches of soil and flat rocks navigating a path known only to him. Both Belloth and Zani followed with the bird scouts appearing on the plain soon after, crashing through the underbrush.

“Zani! Keep them grounded, make the air dangerous with your bow!”

Yelled Terri. Zani nodded, readying her bow as they stopped on a large rock , standing their ground

as the birds attempted to take flight to not tread the untrustworthy ground. She aimed and let loose her first flint arrow, hitting one of their pursuers making the male bird scream in pain as an arrow pierced his arm making him clutch it in pain while Zani readied another arrow. She barely missed the second bird and making them flinch and rethink the idea of flight.

In return a blue female bird flung her spear at the group, barely missing and embedding the weapon deep in the silty muck where it splashed down and was swallowed up by the mix of water and soil. She cursed in the bird's language while the remaining two birds began crossing the treacherous ground, they tried hopping from stone to stone while Zani kept up the pressure with arrows. Unfortunately for the two attackers there were stretches where no two rocks were close enough to jump so they had to take multiple steps across the morass.

It did not take long for one of them to take a wrong step and fall as a patch of quicksand swallowed his leg, making the bird panic as he began sinking deep while his fellow scout recoiled, scared of stepping into the sand as well.

Meanwhile on the far end of the morass the blue female was trying to help the shot male to stem the bleeding from his arm. Zani ignored them since they were no threat for now. Instead she fixed her aim at the trapped scout in the sand. She had a deep distaste for her tribe but also didn't want them to die in horrible ways so she loosed an arrow squarely at his head hitting the panicking bird, punching clean through his skull, causing the body to go limp and slump down in the quicksand. Ironically, death saved the body from sinking fully. Without the birds struggling the body did not sink further and just rested with Zani's arrow embedded in the head.

His comrade saw this and turned to flee but the panicked attempt to run led to another quicksand pit making the scout yell for help to the two birds still at the far end of the sand pits. This screaming was also ended by an arrow granting the second trapped bird a quick death. The unarmed and wounded survivor realized that the tide of combat had turned against them. They turned and tried to retreat into the deep jungle again. Zani lowered her bow but Terri was already sprinting, back to the shore they had come from to pursue the scouts.

“Come on, get them! We can interrogate them!"

The tomcat didn’t want the opportunity to gain information to slip away, or at least that was what he told himself, a burning need for revenge certainly added to the speed of his step as he chased after the birds with his slit pupils narrowing and his heart pumping. He could hear Zani and Belloth behind him, running along as he gripped his spear tightly.

It didn’t take the group long to catch up to the blue bird and her wounded compatriot. The trail of blood was easy to follow for the cat, whose keen senses guided him even when the birds slipped out of sight.

They finally caught up with them in a clearing where the weak light of the stars illuminated the collapsed wounded bird bleeding out, lying in a pool of his own blood. Clearly Zani's arrow must have

hit an important artery in his arm. Only the blue female remained clutching her dead comrades' stone axe as she had managed to navigate herself into a dead end as the clearing was surrounded by a sort of partially collapsed hillside, forming steep walls behind her. She was cornered and clearly panicking. Her red tribal markings had mixed with her comrades blood making it hard to see where the blood ended and the markings began.

Belloth was the first to charge in, swinging his mighty stone mace wielded by his muscular arms, flexing his dark body to impart a terrifying force into the weapon. The Blue bird made a panicked sound that sounded choking and overwhelmed. She lifted the axe to try and hit the rabbit while she jumped to the side like she was trying to dodge a charging bull. Terri was close behind Belloth, spear ready to strike but he realized he was not needed here when the bird was caught off guard by Belloth who turned and managed to strike her with his mace's backswing.

A sickening crunch sounded as the mace struck the scout's ribcage. The woman was flung aside, hitting the back of her head against the steep wall as she screamed and clutched her side.

The clearing fell silent as the three of them turned towards her, lowering their weapons. The wounded bird began to speak, sounding desperate. Zani translated.

"She's begging for mercy."

She explained, Belloth nodded in response.

"I give my word that I will not hit her again if she tells us everything her people know, what villages they have found where they are moving and so on."

He said as he set down his mace with an audible thump as the heavy stone head hit the dirt and he leaned on it. Zani translated again and the blue bird responded with a long string of words in between her groans of pain as she held her broken ribs.

"She says they found a tribe of otters and did to them what they did to the cats. She also says that they will soon sweep back the way they came, especially if her party doesn't return."

Belloth frowned.

"So they will find my home. It's only a matter of time, more reason for us to hurry and get the firestone. Let's go."

He turned away from the bird and picked up his weapon. Zani did the same, slung her bow over her shoulder as they prepared to leave the bird behind to fend for herself. She was badly hurt but could theoretically survive if she was found. Belloth had kept his word and not finished her off. Unfortunately for her Terri had made no such promise and had no inclination toward mercy for her kind anymore.

Zani turned around as she heard a panicked yell from the bird. When she looked, she saw Terri glaring down at the wounded scout. Even in the dim light of the stars, she could see hatred in those eyes behind the mask as the cat lifted his spear and plunged it down. The obsidian spear tip tore through blue feathers, skin and muscle as it was driven into her belly making the bird screech with pain. She gripped the spear in a weak attempt to pull it out as the spear's magic made the already horrible pain unbearable.

Terri felt the refreshing magic of the spear coursing through him, mixing with the euphoria of revenge. Something deep inside him, something burning was guiding his motions. It wasn't hate, hate burned on the surface with bright roaring flames. This sensation was a low simmer, a smouldering gleam like coal. And it felt good. Seeing her squirm and scream in anguish was invigorating in an entirely nonmagical way.

The pain and slow death of his enemy was something that would have been unthinkable to Terri two months ago. But that was the Terri who still had his tribe, who had been raised to hold the quick painless kill sacred. The Terri that hadn't watched everyone he cared for be slaughtered and burned. This was revenge. It was sloppy, slow, needlessly painful and in his deepest depths it made him happy.

Suddenly, the spear was ripped from his hands as sudden voices began to pierce the deep focus he had been in, he heard Zani and Belloth almost muffled, until the words came into focus behind the blue bird's screaming and crying.

“What the fuck was that?”

Yelled Belloth before he lifted his mace and brought it down on the scouts skull, crushing her head into a bloody mess of bone, meat, and feathers against the earthen wall she was leaning against. It was gruesome but a mercy compared to what Terri had been doing to kill her. Terri needed a moment to catch himself from that smoldering space in his head, almost as if he was dazed. Zani held his spear dripping with blood as she stared at Terri.

“What the fuck happened to the painless kill?! I have been along on your hunts and you always made sure the animals die fast!”

Terri frowned.

“If you had been there and seen what I have seen you’d do the same to them!”

He hissed in return, grabbing his spear from Zani, ripping it from her hands. He stomped off leaving Zani and Belloth with the two corpses in the clearing. Zani was shaken by the scouts' screams but seemed more understanding to Terri's outburst.

“He’s really distraught. We can't really hope for anything better with him just passing through the ruins. We should probably give him space to calm down and reflect.”

Belloth sighed and nodded, letting the tension drop from his shoulders.

“You're probably right. It's out of character for him but he's also coping with something I can't even imagine. I'll let it slip and not bring it up again so he can calm down.”

CHAPTER 7:

THE DELVING

The next day passed in relative silence, Terri finished the second knife and gave it to Belloth without comment. None of them brought up the events at the clearing, and it seemed to help. Terri didn't have any more outbursts of mourning or anger. He was calmer now, at least as far as Belloth and Zani could tell. They packed up camp and kept moving, able to march for a few more days with surprisingly little trouble. Eventually, Terri's mood lifted enough to join in on their games at the campsite every night. Surprisingly it took three entire days of marching through the spirit wilds before trouble reared its ugly head again.

Zani was walking in the back of the group as they were cutting their way through especially thick foliage. She felt her feathers subtly shifting, puffing up as what seemed like a cold breeze washed over her. At first she did not know what to make of it. The jungle air was warm and humid, cold gusts made no sense in this environment. But still she felt cold.

When a large, blue, glowing eye came into view behind an ancient gnarled mahogany tree she realized what was happening. She quickly tapped the two men on their shoulders

"We're being followed, A spirit. It's getting close!"

She whispered. She was right to be worried. with spirits that were not worshipped by any village there were always three scenarios. The best was that it was a benevolent being, seeking out worshippers to found a new village with. Another possibility was a neutral spirit that did not care about mortals and would at most, observe them out of curiosity before moving on. The worst and most common scenario however was a malicious spirit. beings that posed a serious supernatural threat and held deep, bitter grudges against mortals, lashing out violently at any they came across.

The two men turned around with waterstone knives drawn, ready to fight if needed. Meanwhile, the spirit unfurled its translucent, weakly glowing form from behind the trees, a single glowing eye fixed on the mortals. Its body's glow was weaker than that of any village's guardian spirit; without the worship of mortals it was diminished but still a massive threat. When it began to speak, its voice was sharp and almost hissing.

“Oh, how fun! New Playmates."

It mused. Its words were playful, but there was a malicious undertone. Its long slender snakelike body slinked closer to them until it was about a spear’s length away.

“As you are so numerous and I am only slightly bored, I have an overly generous offer for you three.”

It said with a mocking motion that could only be interpreted as a bow. The air grew even colder, cold enough that even Belloth could feel it through his thick black coat. Terri glared at the spirit with mistrust.

“Why should we make a deal with you? You are not even wearing a mask. You clearly are no patron of mortals!”

Hissed the tomcat, knife held out threateningly. The spirit’s pale blue eyes fixed on the weapon.

“You will not have to use that little knife of yours if you simply agree to my terms. I'll let you pass without a fight. My deal is as follows. You give me the bird, and I will let you move on as you please.”

"No way! We are not letting you take any of us!”

Yelled Belloth immediately enraged by the proposed deal. The spirit sighed.

“Do you really want to test me, mortals? Take the risk to see how much power I truly hold? You know the power of spirits.”

“Yes, and we know that spirits without worshippers are weaker. You're bluffing!”

Said Zani who was taking cover behind Belloth and Terri. She could, of course, be right and the spirit could be bluffing about its power or she could be wrong which would entail terrible consequences, especially with the knowledge they had that Zani’s tribe would soon find Belloth's village.

The spirit leaned in even closer and extended two thin arms from its slender body, curling his claw-like fingers into half-open palms. They could practically see the temperature drop in the spirit's hands as he formed miniature blizzards in both hands with howling spinning winds and ice crystals forming mid-air.

“This is your last chance to hand her over.”

Hissed the spirit, its tone now somehow frigid. For a split second Belloth weighed the fate of his village and Zani’s life but the thought was immediately dismissed. He could not trust a wild spirit and

simply abandon her. She had done too much for his tribe already and had helped his friend with his grief. He knew if he caved now, he would never forgive himself.

Without warning Belloth charged, taking the spirit by surprise as the burly rabbit suddenly flexed his muscular legs and leapt forward, slamming the waterstone blade into the sprit's spectral body making it flinch as the blizzards in its hands died down, dropping snow to the forest floor, where it began to melt immediately. Terri quickly followed suit, leaping and also striking the surprised spirit.

The entity had clearly been bluffing. It could have ended them mid-jump if it had held the power it alluded to having. Zani watched as the two men's blades punctured the spirit"s form, the entry points began bleeding a sickly blue light that spread in cracks, like veins across the serpentine body as the spirit howled before dissolved in the same blinding light Terri had seen when his tribe's guardian had died.

Once the spirit was gone, Terri stood there, visibly shaking, as he dropped the knife. He knew what he had done was right, The spirit had meant to harm them and take a friend. But reliving something so close to his trauma was just too much for him. Zani and Belloth immediately realized what was happening and moved to support him before he could collapse to his knees. The cat's breaths were shallow but at least this time he did not break into tears again. It took enormous restraint from the cat not to start wailing loudly in the middle of the spirit wilds. He knew that a constant loud noise like that could attract unwanted attention.

Zani tried her best to support Terri while also reaching for the knife and placing it in her bag, ensuring the valuable weapon would not be left behind. Once it was secured, the two of them held Terri until his strength returned and he nodded gratefully.

"Thanks for that. I am sorry that I keep being like this. You might have been better off without me on this trip."

He said weakly. clearly emotionally strained from the ordeal. Belloth immediately shook his head and crossed his arms sternly.

"Don't talk like that! You have every right to be upset and shaken by what happened to you. You're my friend. I would not want to travel without you by my side."

His words were spoken like a reprimand and an assurance at once. He clearly meant well, Terri could tell, nodding .

"Maybe you're right, although could we maybe make camp a bit earlier than usual today?"

Both Zain and Belloth agreed. They were still on time thanks to the surprisingly peaceful crossing of the wilds so far. They made camp early and Terri sat down to knap once again , this time he turned the leftover shards of waterstone into some arrowheads, he had no means to actually make full arrows for Zani right now since they had run out of glue. He mostly made them to distract himself while Zani and Belloth mixed the last of the grains and fruits they had to make a sweet, warm porridge. Terri had also run out of meat that evening, eating the last of his dried rations. They had, of course, anticipated this. Hunting and gathering were essential activities on a long trip and as they lay down to rest they all knew tomorrow they would have to seek out more food.

Waking up the next morning, they began the work of foraging and hunting. Terri felt a bit useless in the first department. As a carnivore the foraging of his tribe had never focused much on edible plants. He knew some of the very obvious edible herbs and spices and a handful of well-known fruits but

when it came to things like edible leaves or mushrooms he had no clue what to look for. The best the tomcat could manage was finding a wild mango tree that was mostly unripe. He cut two fruits that were just starting to yellow hoping they would ripen as they traveled. Zani and Belloth meanwhile were fully in their element working together to pinpoint plenty of edibles, roots, fruits, leaves and mushrooms. They soon filled their bags to accommodate their diets. Of course Zani could have also eaten some of the meat Terri ate but she felt it would be rude to take from the cat's only food source.

Once the Rabbit and Bird had supplied themselves with food the rest of the day was spent hunting with Zani and Belloth constructing some simple traps for small animals. Terri meanwhile had climbed high into the trees leaping from branch to branch with feline grace while holding his spear. Now Terri actually felt useful, up high in the trees with a sharp spear was where he excelled.

Feeling the familiar sensation of air rushing past and leaves brushing against his legs each time he landed was like a balm for his battered soul. His golden eyes narrowed to slits, focusing on the dark shaded niches of the forest floor.

His pointy ears were on a constant swivel, trying to pinpoint interesting sounds. Soon enough he heard the familiar grunts and rustling of a pig. His eyes soon pinpointed the creature. Its bristled fur was darker than the pigs that lived near his village but it was still a pig, a younger one, not as large as the one he had killed on that fateful day but enough to feed him for a few days if butchered properly

The tomcat shifted his weight to move silently, slinking onto the tree above the sow. He took a moment to position himself and extend his claws before plunging down, leaping off the tree with his spear aimed at the pig.

The impact was hard, there was a crunch and he felt the ribs of the animal buckle and snap under his paws as claws and spear dug into the animal. There wasn't even a moment for the pig to realize the threat, the moment the cat's weight came crashing down the spear bored into the sow's skull, burrowing into the brain rendering the body limp as Terri steadied himself on top of it.

It was a clean painless kill, the kind of kill he had reason to be proud of. He felt normal again. Like the day it had all happened. He felt like he could turn around, walk to his village with this meat and butcher it. It was nice to feel normal again. There were no dark searing thoughts in his mind like with the bird scout. No bitterness, just the satisfaction of the clean kill. Of course he knew there was nothing normal about his circumstance but as he dragged the dead animal back to camp he felt slightly better about himself than in the previous days.

Back at camp Belloth and Zani quickly came to assist Terri, stringing his kill up on a tree to drain the blood, and cutting out the organs. Terri could tell they had already had their breakfast with all the fruit peels scattered around the campsite so he took the good organs and threw them on the cooking stone, letting them sizzle as they began skinning the sow and slicing off the meat which was laid out on a large banana leaf.

When the organs were done cooking, Terri sat down to eat, watching Zani and Belloth do their best to butcher the pig. They lacked the skill of a predator but it would suffice to turn into rations. He ate fast, taking in as manny calories from the organs as he could to make sure they wouldn't be wasted and spoil later. After this rushed breakfast he returned to the butchering, using Zani's stone axe to split the bones lengthwise and set them by the fire as well to cook the valuable marrow.

Now that most of the pig was processed the three of them knelt down setting out wide stones to cut the meat into thin strips that would cook quickly and be easier to consume and store. With three

people helping Terri was finally able to do what he couldn't alone with that deer he had killed a month ago. This time there was very little waste, any bones that weren't cooked were dried by the fire and packed up to be used later as materials.

Anything that wasn't laid on the cookingstone to fry was gathered up by Belloth and placed in some of the traps they had set to serve as bait for carnivorous animals or scavengers. Soon Terri got to enjoy the cooked bone marrow while the campsite was filled with the scent of cooked pork. It had been a while since Terri had the opportunity to eat such a feast fresh. He didn't necessarily dislike the dried meats Belloth had given him at the village for the past month but he couldn't deny that a freshly cooked kill tasted better.

When the day ended Terri was gorging himself eating thousands of calories at once as he purred happily with each bite into the juicy meat strips. When it was just about time to sleep Terri tied some twine between two trees and hung all the cooked meat on the string to be dried by dripping off fat at night. He couldn't really fully smoke or brine the meat so he tried his best to reduce the moisture in them before they would go in his bag tomorrow. He laid banana leaves out beneath the meat to capture the fat drippings and washed up with a small amount of water from his water bag to at least get the worst of the blood out of his fur before he'd go to sleep that night.

By the time they woke up again, the fat on the leaves had pooled and solidified. Terri scraped it all up before wrapping it in a leaf, tying it shut with string to make a small pouch he stowed in his bag wrapped in fresh banana leaves.

Once the meat and bone were packed they tore down the campsite and put out the last embers of the fire before moving on once more. Along the way they checked the traps, finding most of them empty until they found one snare that had been baited with offal firmly wrapped around a sizable iguana. Belloth picked up the animal and the rope. He grabbed it by the head and chest before twisting hard in opposite directions to break the lizard's neck with an audible snap. The rabbit then tied the limp body to his bag for butchering at their next camp.

Once all the traps had been checked the party moved on continuing in the same direction they had been going for days. As they kept going they began to notice many small tree spirits appearing up in the branches and roots of the surrounding jungle. The small glowing sprites were a generally welcome sight. Everyone knew that areas where these harmless spirits gathered were usually safe. They looked at the party from the bark of their trees with their tiny heads morphing to imitate the masks that mortals carved for their guardian spirits.

The small spirits had an interest in the three travelers but quickly backed away from any attempt at contact when they saw the waterstone blade gleaming in Belloth's bag. It made Terri a bit sad to see the harmless sprites afraid of them, and he continued on with the others until eventually they saw something curious in the distance where the spirits gathered more densely. They could see the light of fires in the dark foliage. There was a camp and clearly not a small one either.

Without exchanging a word, the three of them knew to crawl from here approaching the camp on all fours to avoid being spotted. It could be Zani's tribe so drawing attention had to be avoided until they could be sure the people here were not birds wearing the red markings.

As they crept closer they could hear talking and activity they could even make out the outlines of guards posted at the edge of the darkness. Some of the strangers' spears even gleamed with the familiar sheen of waterstone. They could see figures carrying woven baskets and bags over their backs as they rested in the dark ferns by the firelight.

Terri was the first to make out who the strangers were, his sharp carnivore eyes picked up the silhouettes at the fire most clearly while Belloth's finely tuned hearing caught the distant talking easily. It took Terri a moment to understand what kind of people he was looking at. They had long sharp horns but they lacked the bulk and thick fur to be yaks or bison from the high mountain peaks. They had hooves like horses or deer but were more slender with pointier faces than those tribes had. It seemed familiar to Terri, as though he had not seen them but had heard them described before. He searched his memory trying to dig for stories of travelling tribes he had heard until it dawned on him.

"Antelopes."

He whispered, earning him confused looks from his companions before he elaborated in a whisper.

“They are like goats or horses but from far away, my father told me about meeting them once. They live in dry lands away beneath the great wheel constellation.”

“I have never heard of that constellation or seen it”

Belloth said, confused.

“Yes, because it is so far away you can't see it from here.”

Explained the cat.

“Well whatever they are, I can't understand a word they are saying. I really wish we had the time to get a language spell put on us like Zani here when we left.”

“Well either way even without hearing them it's clear these people are here to trade and maybe hunt.”

Zani responded. She was probably right, this group was armed but not bearing any warmasks and was travelling with way too many material goods to be a war party. with the strangers' species and intentions seemingly clear the group decided to approach. They tied their weapons to themselves to make it clear they had peaceful intent and let Zani lead to translate.

The two closest guards gripped their spears cautiously as the trio approached the camp. One of the antelopes called out to those around the fire. Now there was a commotion in the camp and many came to see the new arrivals. Zani lifted her hands as she stepped forward in a sign of being unarmed. She opened her beak and began speaking.

"We come in peace, we are mere travelers ."

One of the guards responded using words neither Terri nor Belloth could understand but Zani understood and nodded.

"We will not harm your beasts or families. We understand that you are just here to establish a new village."

Now the large four legged lizards with bags and baskets made sense. Especially now that the strangers came closer to the trio. Terri could tell many of them were young families with children. He frowned. The thought of these people getting caught off guard by the birds brought him grim thoughts.

"We should tell them that this is not a safe place to settle anymore."

He remarked. Zani nodded in agreement.

"Please be warned that this basin is no longer safe. There is a tribe going around raiding other villages. Wherever you came from, you should turn around and go back or head another direction to settle somewhere safe."

Terri could see the faces of the antelopes change from cautious curiosity to fear, he saw fathers and mothers pulling their children closer to protect them. One of the group stepped forward gesturing for the guard who had spoken so far to stand back. The man who had stepped forward was about Terri's age but still seemed to be the leader. When he spoke, Terri and Belloth were relieved to find that he too had been blessed with a language spell by his tribe's shaman.

"We thank you for your warnings to strangers. We are of the Iluhii tribe far from this place. I am Morro, the speaker of my people here. For your kindness, we would like to break bread with you and invite you to rest."

"We would gladly rest for a while but know we will only stay for the meal because we are in a great hurry"

Responded Belloth.

The antelopes nodded and ushered the trio to the fires, where bowls of warm tea and flat crispy loaves of bread waited for them. The three of them sat down cross-legged and ate what was given to them. As they ate, Morrow began chatting with them.

"So what has you in such a great hurry?"

As he asked, he waved to a boy to bring more tea to them.

"We are in search of firestone for a ritual to defend my village from the tribe we warned you about. Actually do you happen to have any?"

Asked Belloth, realizing they could potentially cut their journey short if they simply traded for some tools made of firestone. Morro nodded.

"We have some tools made of it but we are hardly willing to part with them because of how valuable they are."

When the antelope boy returned he tripped, shattering the clay bottle full of tea over the fire dousing the flames immediately as yelps of surprise spread among those near the fire. The camp was robbed

of one of its flames and Morro sighed with annoyance as he began stacking up fresh wood after tossing the soaked logs. He reached for a pointed stick and began the hard process of spinning it rapidly on one of the logs to produce the tiniest smoldering embers to fan into a fire with wood shavings. The three of them quickly realized that these people had not yet discovered the use of pyrite

"I think we can help you here!"

Said Zani as she pulled one of her flint knives out in one hand and a chunk of pyrite in the other. She began striking them together over the kindling rather than the logs earning some confused look until for the briefest moment a spark lit up the dark, then another until finally one of them landed in the wood shavings and Zani fanned the flames with her breath coaxing the shaving alight before she piled up small sticks to start a proper flame. The surrounding antelopes just stared in amazement.

"How did you learn to draw fire from stone? Are you a shaman?"

Asked Morro immediately to which Zani shook her head.

"No, no, but it is a trick known by tribes in this area, I also did not know about it until I arrived here. These shiny, square stones are responsible. If you hit them against a flint surface you create sparks. Maybe a shaman could tell you why this stone makes fire but it certainly does. It's much more convenient than rubbing a stick until your arms hurt."

The antelope nodded with understanding.

"Say, what would you like for that stone?"

Now Terri pitched in.

"If we are trading we can offer more than just one of our shiny stones. Show them the waterstone, Belloth "

The rabbit pulled the two large chunks of waterstone they had taken from the ruins, making the leader of the antelopes nod with recognition.

"Waterstone is something that's always needed out here."

He thought for a moment trying to think of something of equivalent value.

"We can offer furs, food, leather, maybe flint?"

Terri shook his head.

"I think some of your firestone tools would be a fair trade no?"

The antelope considered the offer for a moment.

"You drive a hard bargain cat but your offer is fair. We will give you a firestone knife and two hatchets."

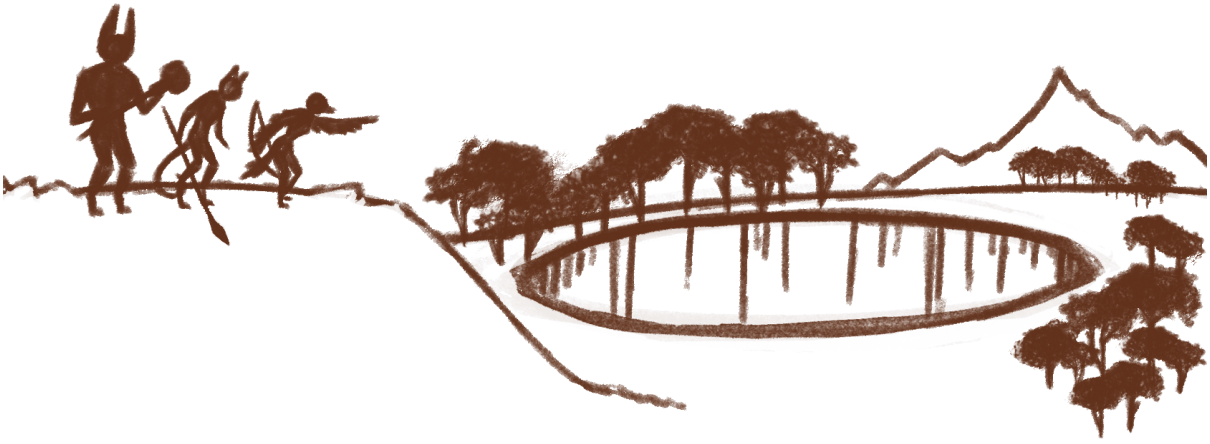
Terri smiled and reached out to shake on the deal. The pyrite and waterstones quickly changed hands for the tools. They were clearly made by an expert toolmaker. It kind of pained them to think that these tools would be consumed for the ritual. With these tools they were definitely closer to getting enough firestone but unfortunately not enough to save the trip to the chasm.

"Such a shame these will be consumed for the rituals, they are the finest tools I have ever seen"

Noted Belloth before drinking some of the tea he had been given from a new bottle that had been brought. Terri and Zani did the same. They relaxed at the fire for a few hours resting their weary legs as they exchanged stories with the Antelopes until they agreed it was time to keep moving. The trade and rest had certainly helped and lifted the group's spirits as they moved on, heading ever farther from Belloth's tribe.

The next few days passed with little action or noteworthy incidents besides the passing of a herd of three-horned lizards that barely paid attention to the party of three hiding in the shrubs. Their evenings were spent chatting, preparing meals and a break for another hunt punctuated the third day since they had met the antelopes.

That day they all went to their sleeping furs especially tired and the process of getting up and tearing down the camp the next day was especially draining to them so it came to them as a huge blessing when they passed the crest of the slope they had been marching up for the past two days and saw a dip in the landscape that swept out into large lush plains where the river cut through less densely forested grassland that was interrupted by a colossal perfectly round hole in the ground.



The sight was jarring. Trees and grass stretched on for miles until a sudden sharp drop just cut off the landscape with its circular yawning maw.

“I have never seen a hole that big. It is a perfect circle too… Do you think this is natural or the work of spirits?”

Terri shrugged as he leaped down the crest of the hill sliding down in one smooth motion balancing his weight on his legs as his paws slid smoothly across the untouched moss and grass.

"Who cares? Whatever happened here is done now so let's go and get the firestone!”

They had no real point to argue so Belloth and Zani did as Terri had done and slid down the slope. It took a solid hour to get closer to the hole, and once they arrived, they set up camp at its edge. Terri couldn't help but peer inside, driven by his feline curiosity.

The hole’s walls were not smooth but still looked as if a colossal force had punched out a circular stretch of land roughly the size of his home village. The bottom of the hole was pitch black, it was so deep that the light vanished into nothingness, plunging the rock walls of the hole into an unknowable abyss.

Terri saw a rock nearby near the edge , he pushed it down and strained his ears to listen for an impact. He waited for a few breaths, then a few more. The sound never came. He shuddered at the thought of how deep this hole must be if the stone fell so deep its sound never returned . Cats were not usually afraid of height but this drop certainly demanded respect even from Terri.

“This thing is fucking deep.”

He announced. Belloth shrugged.

"Doesn't really matter how deep it is. There's no difference between a fall from one thousand steps of distance or ten thousand steps. Both end with you smeared on the ground .”

Ultimately Belloth was very much right. Even if the bottom of the hole had been visible it would have been a lethal drop. Still the darkness down there was upsetting to Terri, especially since it was so complete that even his keen feline eyes couldn't piece its veil of shadows.

“So who goes down and how do we find the firestone?”

Terri recalled the words of Uraia.

“Well, we have to look for a green stone since firestone turns green over time.”

He peered back into the hole and managed to spot a faint patch of bluish green that would have been hard to spot for the other two in the dim light of the spirit wilds.

“There! I can see it and it seems close enough to the top that we can use a rope to get there.”

He pointed to the spot he had found in the chasm's bare rock walls.

“Well then let me go, I'm the strongest I can dig that out faster than you two can.”

Offered Belloth.

“No way man you are too heavy and there's not enough rope to tie to a tree while still reaching all the way down. Zani and I could never hold you. Let me go, I see best in the dark!”

Argued Terri.

“You're both being dumb oafs here. Obviously I should go in the lightest and if you let go of me I can just fly back up and try again.”

Both Terri and Belloth were caught off guard by Zani's argument. They really couldn't counter her reasoning so the two men relented and helped Zani wrap the end of their rope around her torso. She grabbed the stone pick from Belloth's bag and headed towards the edge of the hole, ready to be lowered down.

Terri and Belloth firmly grabbed the rope signalling to her that she could descend now. They watched the bird approaching the edge with the tool held firmly in her beak as she began to descend, climbing down carefully, using the rocky wall to find holds and slowly lower herself down while Terri and Belloth held the rope taut to make sure she wouldn’t fall if she slipped.

Zani was much less nervous about the sudden drop beneath her, having trust in her ability to fly and the rope holding her. She slowly worked her way down until she reached the green outcropping of rock.

She grabbed the tool from her beak and began to swing it striking the base of the stone . She had no real experience in mining or gathering rocks but she reasoned that if she worked the bottom first and then held her hand under it while she worked the top it would be stopped from falling into the abyss by her hand. It took longer than she liked to get a proper crack to form under the lump of copper but she was slowly making progress.

Meanwhile at the top Terri and Belloth could only hear the sharp echoes of stone on stone from the hole. The two men were focussing all their attention into holding the rope so when a stone impacted the ground next to Terri's paw with an audible thump they both flinched and looked at the direction of the noise seeing the stone first and then its origin.

From their left they saw four figures charging towards them, all clearly avian in nature and the one at the front was emitted a faint orange glow from parts of his body .

"Zani fly back up! We're being attacked!"

Yelled Terri as another rock from one of the birds wielding a sling barely missed his head. Zani wasted no time and put the tool back in her beak before kicking herself backward into the abyss the moment the rope went slack as Terri and Belloth hurried to their weapons. She felt the wind rushing past and spread out her wing feathers before flapping rhythmically to propel herself up and out of the hole, dragging the rope beneath her as she dropped the stone tool in the grass and landed to snatch up her own weapons. Within seconds she could tell who was attacking them, the orange glow of the leader gave it away.

"Shit it's Renek!"

Zani's appearance made two of the approaching birds hesitate for a moment, falling behind their comrades as the appearance of another bird opposing them confused them. A shout from their leader snapped them out of it and the one with the sling let loose another rock hitting Belloth squarely in the chest. The rabbit grunted in pain but his muscles were densely packed and absorbed most of the impact, all he'd get was a nasty bruise.

Terri meanwhile held his tail high in the feline gesture of aggression as he charged straight ahead, screaming with unbridled fury as he dodged another rock meant for him.

Zani saw one of the enemies readying a spear to throw at the approaching cat and intervened quickly, loosing an arrow that pierced the spear wielder's arm making the bird screech in pain as the spear fell in the grass. Terri was now closing in on the enemy with Belloth close behind already pulling back his mace for a swing.

"Watch out for Renek! Hit him where his body isn't Obsidian or flame!"

As he drew closer Terri suddenly realized who the leader was. He had seen him before. Those glowing orange eyes and that right arm covered in embers and obsidian. It was the raven who had kicked him off the platform when his village was attacked. The leader of the raid.

The two sides collided as the two leading birds clashed with Terri and Belloth. Terri hissed and jabbed at the raven who was wielding a flaming sword. Renek reacted and blocked the strike with his right arm tip of Terri's weapon glancing off the obsidian feathers coating his arm.

Meanwhile Belloth roared with anger as he let his mighty stone mace crash down at the other bird. It would have been a lethal blow if the green parrot hadn't dodged using his wings to leap up and over

the rabbit striking a blow to Belloth's back with a bone club. Belloth grunted but his sturdy build also managed to take that strike.The birds might have been an even match for Terri's physique but Belloth's strength and resilience exceeded beyond their hollow-boned opponents.

The Rabbit swung around using his momentum to follow up with his mace. The Parrot dodged again and grinned at the rabbit before an arrow hit him squarely in the shoulder making the bird shriek with pain. Zani had anticipated the bird's evasion and punished it, giving the Strong rabbit the advantage to take another swing.

Terri received another of the stones from the bird with the sling but his war mask absorbed the impact, deflecting the blow, preventing a lethal headshot as the tomcat was forced to cede ground as Renek slapped his spear aside with his obsidian arm and lunged forward with his flaming blade in an attempt to strike the cat and set his fur on fire.

As Terri was forced back the final bird arrived at the melee while Zani was taking shots at the sling user in the back trying to suppress the constant barrage of rocks on her friends. This final bird was wielding two obsidian axes and leapt at Belloth from behind. The rabbit's sensitive ears alerted him of the threat and he instinctively leapt upward interrupting his swing to perform an impressive leap that rivalled the parrots own flying jump from before.

The axe-wielding Canary landed ineffectively in the grass as Belloth lifted his mace over his head on his way down. The parrot was not fast enough and received the full force of Belloth's weight kicking him to the ground before the mace followed up and slammed down, crushing the canary's skull into red pulp, killing the attacker instantly.

Zani meanwhile was having a very hard time landing a clean shot at the sling user and decided on a new approach using a technique her people had perfected over generations. She launched herself into the air while evading rocks aimed at her. Once she was high enough to easily shoot over the melee brawl she plunged down intentionally falling as she readied and aimed an arrow mid descent before she caught herself to turn the fall into flight again.

It was a tricky technique but the only way to shoot arrows while in mid-air since aiming and flapping wings were not possible at the same time without a set of extra arms. She watched the arrow fly as she swooped down. The gargled cry and sudden collapse of the body confirmed she had hit piercing his throat with her shot.

Renek noticed the death of two of his men, cursing in his tribe's language. Terri used this lapse in attention and to retaliate as the bird swiped at him with his burning sword. He heeded Zani's advice and aimed at the raven's belly trying to spill his enemy's guts. Renek reacted too late and failed to fully dodge the attack. He attempted to sidestep the spear and ended up receiving a deep cut across his side making him scream in pain as Terri's spear worked its enchantment, sending crippling pain through Renek's side.

The raven recoiled, nearly dropping his sword. He shouted something at the surviving bird with the axes. Both of them quickly fled while Terri attempted to give chase and Zani fired arrow after arrow to try and catch them mid sprint but unfortunately the two surviving attackers managed to outrun the cat and reach the treeline before her shots could land. Terri cursed and threw down his spear, frustrated about failing to kill Renek.

"Zani, can you fly after them to track them? You could guide us from above!"

There was an intense fervor in his eyes and voice, those low burning dark thoughts had returned inside him when he had heard the ravens scream.

"I can try to track them but we should not go after them. They will run back to their camp. I will go see where their camp is to see what direction they are moving in and then I'll come back to grab the firestone with you and run. They will know we are here now and might send another larger war party here."

Terri grimaced he wanted to give chase but Zani was making more sense.

"Fine i hope that raven fuck bleeds to death. You called him Renek?"

She nodded and took off flying after the attackers. She rose above the forest, leaving Belloth and Terri behind for a while until she returned an hour later to report.

"They are moving towards your village, Belloth. So that confirms our earlier suspicion. We need to hurry."

She said as she tied the rope around herself again.

"Then let us hurry. Once we have the stone we head back with fewer breaks and a faster pace."

Agreed Belloth as he grabbed the end of the rope together with Terri before Zani rappelled down again to finish retrieving the chunk of firestone. When they pulled her back up she was holding it tightly, its side that had been buried in rock gleamed in the weak starlight and Belloth quickly stowed it away in his bag, together with the tools this piece would be enough to complete the shell warrior ritual.

"So who was that Renek guy? Why does he have that obsidian arm?"

Asked Terri.

"He's my brother's right-hand man, head of the warriors, it seems they have begun the process of corrupting him too. It started like that with my brother too, first some feathers turned hard, then it spread and his entire side was obsidian and embers. By now he has probably almost completely changed."

She explained with a grim expression as she knelt to begin packing.

"I have seen him before, he was the one who knocked me out and stopped me from helping my tribe during the attack. I have some very specific plans in mind for him."

Noted Terri as they began to pack up and immediately headed back the way they had come, moving faster than before. Their campsites along the way became more sparse, they hunted as they went to keep reserves stocked just full enough to keep Terri moving while Belloth and Zani relied on whatever could be foraged along the way.

The trek back went fairly well until they were suddenly faced with a new kind of obstacle when they passed the ruins of Terri's village. With Belloth's village only a few days away they were faced with raging waters cutting across their previously dry route.

A roaring river tore through the shrubbery, carving a new path. The nearby river must have been redirected by something as they had travelled and had forced the water to cut a new path. Terri cursed.

“Well now we have to find ourselves a different route back or see if we can clear the blockage .”

Mused Belloth as he began following the flow in the opposite direction to see what had redirected the waters. It only took them about half an hour to reach the river's original bed, finding it mostly drained and muddy to their left and blocked on their right by the corpse of a truly colossal long-neck lizard.

The creature must have died here while drinking, its herd having abandoned the body. The footprints and destroyed vegetation in the animals paths was still visible even now. This was a blockage even Belloth could not move, despite his strength.

To their dismay they were not the only ones who had found this corpse. They collectively froze for a moment when the blood smeared snout of a short-armed lizard emerged from behind the corpse.

Its tiny arms may have looked laughable if it were not for the creature's large powerful legs and big jaws lined with teeth the length of hands. Its small reptilian eyes narrowed and its wet feathers and scales reflected the starlight, casting a shifting pattern across the large predator's body as it snarled in a deep tone.

The Creature had clearly scavenged meat from the dead colossus and seemed much more enticed by live prey before it. It circled around the dead body keeping its eyes fixed on the group.

“It's gonna cut off our way back! Run across the riverbed!”

Yelled Terri before all three of them sprinted across doing their best to move quickly across the mud as the animal circled fully around the carcass and began chasing them, footsteps thundering as it approached the group.

They climbed up the opposite riverbank as the lizard jumped down into the muddy bed sinking deeper than they did thanks to its weight. It snarled again

before using its powerful legs to simply force its way through the mud to give chase

.

“To the treetops. In the tallest ones it can not reach us!”

Suggested Zani as they ran deeper into the foliage before she took off flying up to the closest nearby tree. Terri grabbed the coil of rope from Belloth's bag before he was the second to follow, using his claws and feline grace to scale the tall tree in moments. The stomping of the lizard grew closer, shaking the surrounding vegetation and spooking animals that nested in the surrounding area.

Belloth was the last to scale the tall tree using his powerful legs to leap up onto the closest branch as the beast broke through the foliage, now fully visible to the trio. The rabbit scanned the tree trunk above quickly realizing there were no other branches low enough for him to leap up to. Terri made the same realization earlier and flung down the rope.

“Hold on, we will pull you up!”

He called down to his friend. The rabbit grabbed the rope hoping they could pull him up fast enough. He looked back seeing The lizard approach rapidly as the rope began slowly lifting him.

“Fuck he is heavy”

Groaned Zani as she and the tomcat pulled with all their strength, struggling to haul the rabbit's muscular heavy frame up the tree. Belloth meanwhile had to contend with the terror of sharp teeth snapping at him from below trying to take hold of his legs. He tried to keep his legs up and kick the animal's snout whenever the mouth slammed shut beneath him, making the predator roar in pain and frustration each time one of the rabbit’s powerful kicks connected to its face. Belloth's fur stood on end and he could feel his heart hammering in his chest as he slowly ascended and was finally out of reach of the creature.

Once Belloth was fully in the treetop alongside them they all finally allowed themselves a moment to breathe, hearts pounding as they sat in the treetop while they listened to their pursuers angry roars from below. The tree shook once or twice in the animal’s attempts to shake them off by ramming the trunk but when they didn't fall out the bloodied lizard finally retreated back to the river to eat carrion instead of burning calories to catch them. They exhaled together when the stomping steps withdrew.

They rested in the tree for a while. All of them were filthy, their legs caked in mud, and they smelled terrible after spending the last few weeks trekking through the jungle. They all felt exhausted and badly in need of proper washing. They agreed on sleeping in the tree for now to cross the river tomorrow and head straight for Belloth's Village with no more breaks. Relaxation and cleaning would have to wait.

The next day, they climbed down. They moved on against the flow of the river's direction. Walking along its bank to look for a place to cross but the retained but repositioned. The landscape around them began to change slowly, trees became darker and more sparse and the ground more muddy.

“These are not conditions to keep moving. If we keep going we will end up in another swamp.”

Said Zani. Both Belloth and Terri shook their heads, they knew this part of the basin well and knew what lay ahead.

“Worse, both on this side of the river and the other we will be crossing tar pits. The worst place to be while travelling really. One wrong step and you sink if the sleeper do not get you ”

Zani tilted her head in confusion.

"Sleepers? Who are they?”

“More of a what than a who. The tar pits here don't always keep what they swallow up. Things come out covered in tar, emaciated and shambling. They are why people keep away from this area. The river cuts through cleanly with its fast water but traversing this land on foot is hard and dangerous.”

Explained Belloth gesturing towards the darkened terrain around them. Suddenly Belloth's long ears twitched, turning sharply to the left away from the river he suddenly tackled both Terri and Zani to the ground as a fully grown tiger lunged at the spot where they had just stood.

The animal impacted the ground hard, tumbling before coming to a stop on its side in the dirt, growling as it looked over at them. They all quickly got up. They could risk fighting but even with 3 people facing a predator like this at close range was a serious risk

"Cross the river now!"

Yelled Terri before hissing at the tiger and taking off into the water. They were slowed immediately by the harsh current. Terri was the first to make it across and up the other side with Belloth following behind as the tiger jumped in after them trying to catch up past the current.

Zani was the last to follow with the animal close behind her. The striped cat growled and raised its massive paw claws extended to swiping at the bird. Belloth offered Zani his hand to pull her up but the tiger's claws struck her right leg tearing through feathers making her scream as her flesh was torn and her legs blood began to spill into the river. The animal lifted its other paw to land another strike but lost its balance in the rushing current. It roared angrily as the water swept its leg out from under it , carrying the raging beast downstream and away from the group.

Belloth quickly lifted Zani out of the water. The red feathers on her thigh were soaked in deep crimson as the blood poured from her leg. She groaned trying to suppress her screams since she knew that would attract more trouble.

Belloth quickly unrolled some furs to lay her on as Terri gathered leaves and fashioned a bandage. He wrapped them tightly and secured them with a bone needle and thread from Zani's bag. While the cat was doing that Belloth grabbed a length of rope and tied it around her leg trying to slow the bleeding. These were the only quick and easy methods they knew to stabilize her .

"If only Uraia was here she'd be a much better healer. We need to get Zani there quickly!"

Muttered Terri before Zani grabbed his arm and stared at him eyes wide with adrenaline.

"P-purple berries, small red flowers, rounded leaves bring me the leaves to chew!"

She gasped describing some kind of medicinal plant. Terri and Belloth were not familiar with the plant's effects but Terri knew it grew in the basin and he had seen it in his tribe's shamans stash of herbs once.

"You take care of her, I will get the leaves!"

Said Terri to Belloth before he bolted back towards the treeline away from both the tar pits and the village. Hhe wished they could have searched on the way to Belloth's tribe but he knew that most of that distance was now covered in tarpits and with someone this badly wounded they couldn't cross the river again.

Belloth meanwhile had to do his best to distract her from the pain. He gave her a stick to bite down on and did the only thing he could think of telling stories from his childhood. Anything to keep her mind occupied. He recounted the story of his first hunt with Terri, how bad he was at hunting and how the cat had to show him the ropes and how to land a clean painless kill. She seemed absorbed in his words, whether she listened out of affection or genuine interest for the rabbit or for her actual interest in the story. It mattered not to Belloth as long as she was not actively screaming.

Terri meanwhile delved deep into the dark jungle once more using his keen vision to seek out the plant. He eventually found it, growing in the shade of a large mahogany tree, he ripped off as many leaves as he could and stuffed them into his bag before sprinting back to Belloth and Zani.

“Here, the leaves.”

He practically shoved a handful of them into Zani's face. She began chewing them and swallowed a mouthful. It took a while for the effect to set in. She grew more still, her pupils dilated and her heartbeat quickened as the leaves' took hold, speeding up her thoughts, numbing the pain and spreading a soft euphoria through the bird's body.

“I think it's working. Do you feel better, Zani?”

Asked Belloth to which he got a nod and a soft chirp.

“Alright now, that she is stable, we have to get moving again. You should carry her, we can't make her walk like this.”

proposed Terri while Belloth nodded and picked up the weakened robin. She was getting noticeably warmer and even twitched slightly from time to time as the group made their way into the tar pits. The ground darkened, turned black and slick with mud, dark mosses covered it in sparse patches and soon the ground became dotted with large and small pits of bubbling black tar.

They could see large bones emerging from some ponds, standing in these black lakes like a warning. The ground was treacherous, not every tar pit was visibly bubbling, some were covered with moss, dirt and grime that appeared like walkable ground. It was a horrible path, one neither Terri nor Belloth would have picked if they weren't in such a rush. They did not know how much time they had gained but even if they had won a week of time Zani's condition demanded fast care by a shaman.

“I hate this place. Makes my fur stand on end, it's too quiet.”

Grumbled, Belloth. Terri could tell his friend was nervous, his large rabbit ears were on a constant swivel, trying to listen for threats. Terri felt the same unease just that in his case he scanned the floor with his sharp eyes while trying to mostly walk on solid looking stones.

He noticed something stirring the tar in a pool not far from them. The surface shifted slightly. It could have been a bone or corpse emerging from the pit but Terri took no chances. He quickly stabbed his spear into the tar aiming at the mysterious emerging thing. The sound was wet and the resistance he felt was not that of a piece of wood or bone but that of flesh. He could tell from years of experience in hunting. He pulled the spear back out finding both tar and dark blood caked on the tip as the thing he had stabbed began to fully emerge.

Its emaciated frame was wheezing and barely recognizable as it was coated in thick black tar slowly running down its form. It was about Terri’s size and had two arms and two legs but that's where the identifiable features ended, it could have belonged to any tribe and Terri wouldn't be able to tell. It began to shamble towards Terri, arms outstretched as if to embrace him. He hissed and jabbed his spear into the figure again as all around them the pits began stirring with tar coated limbs emerging.

“Shit, we woke some sleepers! Run!"

Yelled Belloth as Zani clung to him looking around in fear evident in her expression with her hurt leg. Even the leaves weren't enough to calm her nerves in this situation. Terri meanwhile hurried ahead, using the butt of his spear to probe the ground as he went to check for hidden pools of tar,

allowing him and Belloth to move swiftly as the hordes of groaning tarred bodies emerged and tried to grasp at them.

At one point, a sticky hand grabbed Terri's tail. He hissed and spun around, driving the tip of his spear into the creature's black skull. There was a sickening crunch as its oddly soft and porous bones crumpled under the force of the obsidian spear , caving in the skull and causing the hand to fall limply from his tail. He shuddered in disgust and kicked the dead creature back into the tar before hurrying on with Zani and Belloth close behind him. Belloth did his best to carry Zani while keeping pace with Terri and avoiding grasping hands. He could feel Zani's heartbeat and breath as she pressed her face and chest into his body, clinging to the rabbit as though he were the only solid thing in a world that had turned hostile.

At one point Terri was confronted with a patch of land surrounded by tar, he cursed and looked around frantically to find another path until he noticed a large bone stuck in the tar not far from here.

"Belloth, quickly knock this down! I will protect Zani "

The rabbit nodded, setting down Zani carefully before he grabbed his mace from his back, he approached the bone as Terri took position behind them, faced with a horde of sleepers. He could tell not all of them were anthropomorphic like him, some of these were clearly animals sporting four or sometimes more legs.

He could hear Zani behind him praying desperately to the mountainfather since he was the only local spirit she knew. He took a wider stance and began jabbing his spear into the mob of sleepers.

Zani kept praying as she watched Belloth straining his muscles with each swing of his mace making it crash hard into the bone, cracks spreading with every impact. He had initially tried to push it over but it was stuck too deeply in the tar. Each strike was accompanied by a loud crack that splintered bone and echoed through the air.

Breaking this large bone was hard work even for Belloth and as he worked the swarm of sleeper closed in pushing Terri ever further and further backwards even as he kept killing them leaving the tar-coated bodies collapsing to the ground in the dozens.

"How much longer do I have to fend them off? It's getting a bit tricky here!"

Said the tomcat nervously feeling the back of his leg finally touch Zani's body laying behind him.

"Just! One! More!"

He grunted as he put in one last powerful swing making the bone finally collapse with a loud crack, crashing into the tar below forming a bridge for them. He quickly picked up Zani and hurried across as Terri backed off once again trying to hold the space between himself and the sleepers.

When Belloth stepped on the bone with Zani, it sank under their combined weight, unable to support the weight of two people for long. The rabbit hurried across making the bone sink more than halfway into the tar by the time he was across. Terri saw his friends had made it safely and finally got to stop stabbing into the mass of sleepers. He turned and ran across the bone bridge feeling it sink behind him as the tar claimed it, he ran faster trying to outrun the sinking motion. He could feel tar lapping at his heels when he saw the bone ahead of him also plunge below the surface of the tar.

He focussed and leapt forward, trying to imitate the way Belloth jumped. Copying Belloth's movement as best he could with his lighter frame. He groaned in pain as he landed unceremoniously on the other shore. He felt his paws still touching the uncomfortably hot tar and got up shaking off the impact .

"Never going back there again."

He grumbled as Belloth nodded.

"Same here bud."

Terri got up relieved to see the tar pits slowly thinning and turning back into normal earth to tread, leading uphill and through a small grove before they would finally return to the foothills of the mountain where Belloth's tribe dwelled. This trip took them another two hours before finally the walls and fields came into sight. They hurried inside drawing concerned looks as they carried the wounded bird to Uraia's burrow to be cared for by a real healer. The young shaman's eyes widened as Belloth laid down Zani's body. The bird was groaning in pain since the leaves' effects had worn off by now.

"Stars above, what happened to you girl?"

She asked Zani.

“Tiger claws.”

Groaned the robin in pain as Uraia unwrapped the improvised bandage to inspect the wounds. She quickly turned to her stash of bowls, pots and hanging herbs, picking out the right herbs and salves. She piled them up on a stone and began grinding them into a fine paste which she then applied to the wound before applying a proper cloth bandage to the leg. She then gave her a different plant to chew on to numb the pain. Zani ate the leaves without protest and closed her eyes to rest.

“You can go now, boys, I'll be taking care of her. you should go see my master or the Mountainfather if you found what you left to get.”

The two men nodded, leaving the burrow. They went to talk to the tribe’s elderly shaman who they found deeper down performing a ritual of worship in the Spirit Cave. They waited patiently for the ceremony of burnt offering to end before they approached and bowed to The mountainfather. They then turned to the old shaman to talk to him. They unpacked the clump of raw firestone and the bartered tools to present them.

“We have found what we need for the spell! We’ve also confirmed our fears: the birds are coming this way.”

Announced Terri.

“That's worrying news and unfortunately what you brought is not yet ready. That raw chunk has to be molten first. We will have to use one of the toolmakers' kilns. You have to melt all of these together into a solid clean object to use as fuel. While you do that I will consult with the mountainfather for the proper procedure for the spell of the shellwarrior.”

“Alright, we will go to the toolmaker's hut at once .”

Affirmed Belloth as he grabbed the collection of objects before they headed to the surface. The toolmaker's hut was one of the few buildings that had to be on the surface to work in the bright sunlight. When they approached, only one toolmaker was working, slightly older than Belloth but far less muscular. The craftsman was knapping a stone over a hide stretched over his thigh for protection. He looked up, shielding his eyes from the light of the sun. Terri knew him, It was Horrum the same toolmaker that had helped them carve the stone limbs of the shellwarrior.

“We need your help again Horrum, We are preparing the fuel for the shellwarrior ritual and we need you to help us melt this stone.”

The brown rabbit perked up curiously.

“Melt stone? That usually does not do much, it just makes the rocks shiny and brittle, like obsidian but worse to work with. How would that help with that big boy I helped you build?”

Belloth showed him their haul of firestone.

“It is not ordinary stone, this is a firestone, a special material that melts properly and can be made into these kinds of tools. We need it all melted together into one solid shape.”

The rabbit dropped the hammerstone he had been holding and grabbed one of the hatchets from Belloth admiring its flat, thin blade and straight edges.

“How come we don't turn this stuff into tools then? This is amazing! Melting these beautiful hatchets and that knife sounds like a crime!”

He said in awe, clearly upset at the idea of destroying such wondrous craftsmanship to reclaim material.

“Because if we don't, that big construct we built will be nothing but a decorative sculpture. We need this stuff to make it move through magic. The shaman told us to.”

Explained Terri.

“Damn that's such a shame. Does it matter what shape we make it? If not we can just pour it into a shallow mold to make a disk. That would be the easiest way to do it.”

Mused Horrum as he grabbed the chunk of raw Firestone to weigh it.

“I do not think the shape matters, we can do a disk. I'll get to digging that hole then while Belloth can help with the melting part.”

Offered Terri, reaching for a digging stick to carve a round flat dent into the floor in front of the clay kiln. Horrum immediately got to setting a fire and Belloth went to grab more wood to feed it. The craftsman clearly didn't have much more to ask; he was too excited for the task at hand. It may have hurt the brown rabbit to melt these tools but the prospect of working with this new material got the craftsman worked up.

Soon the fire was roaring and Horrum was feeding it more air with a deer hide fan. Belloth brought a carved stone bowl to hold the pieces before he used his brute strength and a lever jammed in between the the firestone parts and wood parts to separate the blades from the grips of the tools.

Terri loaded the different pieces of firestone in the stone bowl and watched Horrum carefully place them in the kiln. They all watched as Belloth took over fanning the flames.

“It's starting to glow and kind of looks like a liquid. It looks partly liquid at least, but some pieces are not melting properly. Let me get those out in case they mess up the process.”

Horrum said as he reached for a wooden spoon. He dipped it in water and inserted it into the molten mass using it to scoop out the floating impurities as the wet spoon steamed inside the kiln. Once this was done only the glowing orange liquid remained.

“It does not look like it will change much more. I think we can pour it. To be honest I thought this stuff would become like clay that we can just trample into shape in the hole you dug but this looks way more liquid than I expected.”

Said the brown rabbit as he reached for a pair of wooden tongs that were blackened at the ends from years of use in the kiln. He wetted them as well and carefully lifted the stone bowl filled with molten firestone. Slowly, he tipped the contents into the pit as the three of them watched as the glowing material flowed in like water before it settled and slowly cooled, revealing a dull, unpolished firestone surface beneath . Once the glow had fully disappeared Belloth reached out to touch it but immediately pulled his hand back with a curse .

“Damn, that is still hot!”

He yelled.

“I guess we will just have to wait longer. I am exhausted and the sun is already dimming anyway.”

Said Terri as he yawned and stretched. The tomcat was right, the sun really was starting to dim already, signalling the start of nightfall. Belloth nodded, getting up to also head to bed.

"We will check on it tomorrow, Horrum."

He called back to the brown rabbit who was extinguishing the kiln by now. The walk to Balloth's quarters was short and they both fell into a deep restful sleep almost immediately.

CHAPTER 8:

THE WARRING

After a full breakfast and a trip to the washing basin the next morning, Terri and Belloth headed to Uraia's burrow to check on Zani, who was already up and eating a bowl of soaked, sweetened oats.

"Hey,"

She mumbled, still a bit groggy, making Terri grin.

"Someone's still tired."

"Well, yeah, I just got up. But I feel much better, thanks to Uraia. She'll be back in a bit. I think she's getting more food. But since you two are here now, I have a question for you, Belloth."

The rabbit nodded and knelt down beside her to listen.

"Do you think your tribe would accept me as a member? Not just as a guest but permanently?"

"Of course, but to be accepted by the elders you have to prove your dedication to us and the Mountain Father."

He explained.

"Well, that's basically already done. She got hurt trying to help with the firestones."

Said Terri dismissively, but Belloth shook his head.

"No, it's not that easy. The act has to be undertaken after the person in question receives markings, the test has to be formal, we can't use past actions to justify her joining. If she wants to join, she has to ask the elders to undertake a test."

"I'm fine with that. I think I'll be able to walk with the aid of a crutch. Can we go after I've eaten?"

Both of them agreed and within the hour the trio entered the council chamber of the elders, kneeling with their heads bowed in respect before all the wizened rabbits sitting in the warm chamber on piles of furs as they smoked potent herbs in long decorated pipes.

"Wise elders, we wish to ask for the rite of acceptance for Zani here. She wishes to join us after abandoning her tribe for their unprovoked aggression against our friends, the cats of the valley."

The elders eyed the robin suspiciously before a man with a long beard and gray fur responded.

"She could very well be a spy or an infiltrator. Do you vouch for her Belloth? You are a son of Berren so your word would be enough for us to consider her."

He nodded.

"I swear on my burrow and my father that I trust Zani."

They nodded solemnly.

"Then she will receive her markings. Tell us Zani what action do you offer us as a trial?"

"I wish to puppeteer the shellwarrior for your tribe. My old tribe is coming here any day probably and I want to inflict their heaviest losses. With my leg wounded I think the best way to do that is from inside the shellwarrior."

A murmur passed through the elders.

"We will put it through a vote. who here is in favor of letting Zani prove herself in the shellwarrior?"

Slowly, hands went up. There were nine elders, at first 3 voted yes then 4 and finally a 5th lifted their arm giving Zani the permission she needed.

"Then it is decided Zani. Belloth will apply the markings, he knows the patterns."

Zani was glad that no one could see her blushing under her feathers but the thought of Belloth painting her body excited her and she nodded profusely.

"Thank you, wise elders. You won't regret this!"

She chirped as he got up, practically yanking Belloth's arm to follow her. Terri followed them out as they headed to Belloth's burrow. Once inside, Belloth got some white paint he had for painting his home's walls. Zani stood with her arms and legs slightly spread so Belloth had full access to every inch of her feathers.

Terri decided that this was best left as a moment between the two and did not follow them into the burrow, instead he headed to the surface to check on the firestone disk. It had seemingly fully cooled when he tried to touch it. The dull unpolished surface did not look as refined as the blades used to make it but it would do. He grabbed a stick and wedged it into the edge of the hole pushing down to lever the disk out of place.

Initially he wanted to carry it over to the shellwarrior but he realized that rolling it would work better. Within a few minutes the disc rested beside the lifeless towering figure, casting its large shadow down on him. Even while it was inactive and on its knees the shell warrior was many times larger than him. If Terri were not familiar with the power of magic he would have deemed the idea of it ever moving impossible.

He stepped back and admired his work while, deep beneath him Belloth was very carefully painting the sacred patterns of the trial onto Zani's body. The white lines contrasted strongly with the bird's reddish brown feathers as she tried her best to keep standing upright without her crutch.

Belloth could not see Zani blushing but he was certain he could feel her warm breath on his arm when he painted her chest and neck. The rabbit could not ignore the tension in the room. The air felt warmer than usual and he couldn't deny that even with her leg bandaged her form was breathtaking and her face glowed with an ethereal beauty. She looked up at him with her big eyes fixed on his.

"Belloth?"

"Yes?"

“This might be the last private moment we get before my tribe could show up at any moment… So I wanted to tell you something.”

“I’m all ears”

He said with a grin as he moved his long ears, unable to let a good pun go to waste. She smiled at his joke.

“Ha, ha, very funny”

She said with feigned sarcasm unable to suppress her genuine amusement in her voice. She needed a moment to regain her train of thought and was unsure how to return to the original topic. So she improvised by getting straight to the point.

“I… I really like you. I like when you touch me and hold me. I think you’re the best man who I've ever met. You are strong but also kind. You are not like others who boast about their strength. You never passed up on an opportunity to protect or help since I've known you. So I was wondering if you would like to kiss me i-if you felt the same.”

Belloth's face flushed with heat as he looked down at the robin before him. He didn't know how to respond or even how to kiss someone with a beak. He held her by her shoulders making sure his touch was gentle as he kissed the tip of her beak prompting Zani to involuntarily chirp softly as she did the same, her feathers lifting slightly as she wrapped her arms around the tall strong rabbit, holding him close for as long as he'd let her.

Meanwhile back on the surface Uraia had joined Terri, both of them unaware of the tender moment between Belloth and Zani beneath them.

“I see the firestone has been provided. That's good. My master has instructed me on the proper circle so if you would help me with that I could get it set up faster.”

Terri nodded.

“Sure, I've never drawn a magic circle but I will help however I can.”

“Great. Then take this chalk, stick, hammer, and twine. First I need you to hammer the stick into the ground here. Make sure the end tied to the stick sits loosely. We don't want it to wrap around as we go.”

he nodded and drove the wooden spike into the dirt with a few well-placed blows of the stone hammer he was given. He then tried the string to the chalk and the other end to the stick.

“Great, now draw a circle using the length of the string as a guide.”

He did just that, tracing a large circle around both the shellwarrior and the disk. When he reached the shellwarrior he had to untie the chalk to complete the circle behind it before tying it on again. Uraia nodded.

“Now shorten the string by two palm lengths and draw a smaller circle.”

He repeated the process and followed her instructions each time she told him to shorten the string or reposition the stick to a new spot for a new circle. Slowly but surely as he drew each new circle. Uraia followed behind, filling in each new smaller circle with a magical symbol until they had the full spell complete .

“Great. Now lay the disk on the fuel circle”

She pointed to a circle bisected by a long line that was flanked by 2 parallel shorter lines. He rolled the disk over to it and looked up at the white rabbit.

“So what is the spiritual fuel for this spell?”

“This is a spell in the wind of control so the same as last time we will be utilizing pain. It is a very potent fuel.”

“Then I will get my spear. I think Zani should be the one using it again with her fresh wound; she could use some of its healing magic.”

Uraia nodded.

“Be aware though that you might have to reapply the spell to your weapon soon. I don't know how many times it was used since the last refresh of its magic.”

“I'll deal with that after the ritual if we have the time before the birds strike.”

“Sure, I'll look for the supplies in my reserves or ask my master after the ritual.”

Terri nodded and headed down to Belloth's burrow to get his spear.

“May I come in?”

He asked as he stepped up to the entrance which was closed with a fur hanging over the hole in the tunnel wall. He heard movement inside before the furs were pushed aside by Belloth.

“Sure bud. We're done with the markings anyways.”

When Terri entered to get his spear he laid his eyes on Zani's body now adorned in white symbols. He smiled.

"Those look good on your feathers! kind of a shame that those are temporary."

"I think I like yellow better anyways."

she chirped clearly, quite happy as she threw a glance at Belloth. Terri could tell something had happened between them and he was glad for it. He had felt the energy between them from the start and was happy for them even if their new bond made his feelings of loneliness resurface, filling his throat with that familiar dark void.

"I will head back up to eat in the sun. Everything is ready. You can come up for the ritual whenever you are ready."

He said, excusing himself to return to the top and try to grapple with his emotions once again. He sat down in the bright sunlight once he emerged to the surface. He laid his spear by the ritual circle and sat crosslegged, watching the people around him go about their daily lives. He saw the toolmakers creating some axes, he saw mothers weaving cloth and fathers teaching children. He decided to occupy himself by finishing those Waterstone arrows from the leftover flakes he had as he looked around.

It was all so painfully familiar, a scene that threatened to push the tomcat back over the edge of tears. He thought of Renek and hoped that when the attack came he'd be the one to drive the life from that raven's body.

Slowly his clawing loneliness morphed into those familiar burning coals. His imagination drifted, dismissing the memories in favor of ideas for the future. Ideas that dwelled in dark places. He worked on the arrows almost absentmindedly as his mind wandered.

These thoughts were also filled with screams but these were the screams of the invaders and they brought Terri a grim sense of satisfaction. Making him smile faintly as he imagined using his spear to perform horrible acts on them.

Such thoughts would have disturbed him or any member of his tribe, they would have made holy Muiari turn her back on him in disgust. But he felt justified in these fantasies. So he indulged, getting lost in these visions until someone touched his shoulder. He jolted in surprise as he was pulled back to reality, finding that by now the sun was setting and people were retiring to the burrows below. He looked up seeing Zani, Uraia and the old shaman Koia standing over him.

"We are going to start now. Would you mind taking the drums?"

He nodded, standing up to head to a set of simple hide drums that had been set to the side of the circle. He was by no means an expert but he could keep a steady rhythm.

"Now Zani please stand in this circle and Belloth since you have volunteered to be hurt again, stand here"

Koia guided each participant to their position in the circle before he and Uraia took their positions. Uraia lit several clay oil lamps around the circle for light now that the sun had fully dimmed.

"Now play to the rhythm of our chant Terri."

Instructed Uraia as she and her teacher began to slowly chant in a slow, steady cadence, the words unfamiliar to him in a rhythm he could follow.

Belloth handed Zani the spear and turned his back offering himself to the blade as he knelt in his circle. Zani clearly disliked that she had to hurt him again but she also knew that she had to heal faster and Terri's spear was just the perfect tool for that. She set the sharp obsidian point against the black muscular back and began slicing down, careful to break the skin without cutting too deep. Belloth cried out as both the circle and the firestone disk began glowing faintly.

Terri didn't like how willing Belloth was to suffer for others but he understood the impulse. That's just how his friend was, always trying to make it easy on others. He watched as the rabbit bled from the long thin cut but what should have been a surface wound made the rabbit clench and scream as if he was being disemboweled. The screams sounded just like those of the scout Terri had killed or when he had struck Renek's side.

The chanting sped up and so did Terri's drums as the disk began to dissolve into nothing and the massive shallwarriors twitched as if it was a living thing. Terri's eyes widened, he had known this was of course the goal but seeing the construct move even slightly was fantastical. Finally the Disk disappeared completely and as the large frame of the construct rose, standing up as Zani pulled the spear away from Belloth's back, silencing his screams of pain and reducing them to pained grunts as he turned around to also see their creation standing upright.

The chanting and drumming ended as Zani slowly walked up to the looming figure of stone and wood. She reached out to touch its stone thigh. It was as cold to the touch as any stone despite her expecting the warmth of a living thing. The moment she touched it she couldn't contain her curiosity anymore and immediately climbed up and into its top under a dome of woven branches.

She knelt down inside its hollow wooden chest leaving her head poking up into the dome giving her a good field of vision. She laid her hands on the wood and suddenly felt a strong force that seemed to hold her hands and legs attached to the device. anchoring her in place. She could sever this pull at will but didn't want to. She wasn't sure what to do now so she imagined taking a step forward.

The shellwarrior obeyed as quickly as her body would have responded, stepping further into the circle. It shook the earth a bit and she was taken aback by the sensation. It felt like her own foot had made that step but it carried so much more mass than her own leg would. She could swear she felt the earth beneath her feet despite kneeling on wood. It was an odd sensation but something she assumed she would get used to.

Next she lifted the arm with its oversized spear swinging it high above the heads of everyone present. She realized her swing even cleared above the huts roofs. When she saw that she could even look over the village's wall she got excited and decided to give the Dorgabone legs a spin, mimicking Belloth's powerful leaps .

For a moment the legs tensed and the bones flexed before the large figure leapt into the dark soaring over the wall before she landed and let out a triumphant cry, raising its arms in celebration.

"It works!"

The old shaman smiled.

"Of course it does. Errea doesn't lie to us. The Spells that he teaches work. They always have."

He called back over the wall before Terri joined in.

"Now don't go running off with your new toy. Get it back inside. If their scouts see that thing out there, it will ruin the element of surprise!"

She sighed and nodded, hopping back over the earthen wall before she climbed out of the shell warrior.

"Shame this thing is incredibly fun to use!"

She chirped as he hopped down again.

"Maybe, but it's also our surprise weapon, so we'll keep it behind the walls for now. Maybe even cover it with hides in case they fly over."

Said Terri as he eyed the communal storage hut.

"We can get to that tomorrow, but for now we should probably rest. Oh, and Zani, I made some special arrows for you."

They all agreed, heading down to the burrows, where Zani stowed her new special arrow in her quiver. The group lay down to rest for the night to rise early the next day to cover the shellwarrior in almost every hide the tribe could spare. They also erased the chalk lines from the night before to ensure no one would copy the spell.

"I think it is time we get people ready for the fight too. The elders already sent out messengers to nearby tribes to warn them of the invaders. We should probably get every adult armed. and maybe the children should sleep in Errea's cave for the next few days."

Suggested Zani once the circle was erased.

“No need. Every adult in the tribe already owns at least one weapon but the idea with the children is good there is no place safer for them than under the Mountain Father’s watch when the birds arrive.”

“Alright then, all we can do is wait really. I should probably get my spear enchanted again so if you need me I’ll be at Uraia’s burrow”

Said Terri before heading underground to meet with the white rabbit, who was currently grinding some herbs on her cooking stone.

“So, did you get lucky with the leeches and thorns?”

“Well, partially. We are all out of any thorny plants. The only thing we do have is dried leeches, so you will only be able to recharge one of your weapons effects”

“Damn that's unfortunate but good to know. I'll take those leeches then and head out to find something to serve as spiritual fuel.”

She nodded.

“I recommend some small animals. Make it suffer for a while but don't kill it while the spell is still going; otherwise, it will go badly.”

Explained the young shaman as she handed him a fistfull of dried leeches.

“I'll get one of the rats that try to get into the food storage all the time.”

His familiarity with his friend's tribe's village was very helpful in his endeavor. It didn't even take him 20 minutes to locate a rat. He snatched the small animal, grabbing it with ease thanks to his feline speed.

The creature squeaked in panic as he rolled out the leather scroll and laid his spear on it. He then laid the leeches in the fuel circle the same way he had placed the firestone the day before. He grabbed a nearby rock and began crushing the rat's tail, making its squeal and squirm in pain each time the rock hammered down. The circle began to glow, and so did the symbols on the spear as the leeches slowly disappeared.

He felt bad for what he had to do to the rat, but he knew he needed the healing effect of his spear for the battle ahead. Once the leeches were gone and the spell was complete, he lifted the rat off the scroll and broke its neck to end its suffering and stop it from pilfering the tribe's food supplies.

He rolled up the leather sheet again and picked up the spear. Maybe it was better that it didn't have the pain spell on it now? It certainly made the weapon more humane, more in line with what Muiari would have wanted. But deep down, he knew he didn't care anymore. All he wanted was for the birds to pay, especially the cursed raven with his burning sword.

His train of thought was interrupted when he heard noises from above. He hurried through the tunnels toward the surface. Once he reached sunlight he saw every adult rabbit of fighting age gathering in the center of the village, bearing weapons. They wore no war masks like Terri did as it was not a tradition of their tribe.

Instead they were chanting and stomping one foot rhythmically, using their strong legs to create a loud reverberating thump that echoed off the walls around them making it sound as though thousands of rabbits were stomping. It was their war dance. They must have spotted the birds approaching. He saw Zani off to the side pulling the hides off the shell warrior. He hurried over to help.

“I guess I won't have time to ask the elders if the trial is still valid without me being hurt. I'll just have to hope.”

He said as she began to climb the construct’s body.

“Yeah, good luck with that thing!”

He said as he watched her enter the top. The body of wood and stone jerked upward for a second before it rumbled to life, shifting mass and rising to its legs, letting Zani peer over the wall.

“They are coming! They brought a warbeast. There are probably a hundred, that's most of the tribe!”

She called down to the rabbits and Terri. By now the attackers were flying close enough that they could also be seen from a lower vantage point. The sight was quite intimidating but what Terri focussed on was not the mass of warriors with red body markings but the warbeast, a flying lizard bearing a figure with a black arm and flaming sword on its back. He hissed, recognizing Renek as its rider.

The rabbits armed with bows immediately began to open fire when the attackers came into view, sending volleys of stone-tipped arrows into the sky to shoot down attackers.

Renek yelled something in the bird's language as around ten of the attackers were struck and seven of them fell out of the sky ending up as contorted bloody corpses on the ground beneath.

Terri watched as every archer on the birds side pulled out their bow and readied an arrow, plunging downwards like he had seen Zani do. The volley that came down from above hit 3 rabbits killing 2 before Terri saw one coming for him. He tried to dodge but even his feline agility did not save him. He screamed as the arrow passed by his leg ripping open his thigh. He felt hot blood pouring from the wound as he clutched his leg with one hand, groaning in pain.

Zani responded to the volley leaping upwards taking her fellow birds by surprise when something they had deemed a statue suddenly leapt up high and swatted multiple of them out of the sky while impaling another with an oversized spear.

Renek cursed, realizing their air would not be safe for them, he ordered his warriors to land early. Putting the attackers on the back foot as the shell warrior slammed back down to the ground swinging its spear to fling the corpse off of the stone tip, sending the body into the mountainside with a sickening crunch as its bones shattered on impact.

When the birds landed the rabbits charged clashing with the invaders before they even fully had a chance to draw weapons in many cases. Suddenly their overwhelming numbers were beginning to turn into red puddles soaking into the dirt as more birds fell. Terri saw Belloth leading the charge and crushing a yellow parrot's ribcage with his mace.

Renek attempted to swoop low with his warbeast but Zani saw it coming and once again jumped up high striking the lizards tail with her spear making the creature screech in pain and crash towards the ground plummeting directly into the toolmakers hut, shattering its straw roof as the animal flapped and squirmed and Renek was sent flying off its back on impact.

Terri seized the opportunity charging towards Renek as the bulk of the attackers was brawling with Belloth's tribe while Zani stomped around the battlefield killing dozens of men and women with swipes of her giant weapons.

Renek pulled himself up and grabbed his flaming weapon as he looked up and saw the bleeding masked cat approach. Terri saw the recognition in the raven's eyes. three meetings in battle weren't so easily forgotten.

The raven's side was healed by now, likely with magic. Terri meanwhile was bleeding profusely and gritted his teeth as he approached the raven. He knew the first strike would likely make or break this fight. He needed to hit so his leg could heal before he'd bleed out.

Renek charged at him with his flaming blade lifted for a swing. Terri barely dodged to the side following through the motion with his spear digging the obsidian tip into the raven's shoulder. The scream of pain was music to the tomcat's ears. He felt the familiar warmth of the spell flooding his body as the flesh in his thigh knit itself shut again. He felt amazing and lunged after the raven trying to keep his opponent far enough to not hit him with the flaming sword. Terri had the advantage, Renek was bleeding and outspaced, unable to close the gap between himself and Terri.

The raven reached for a hollowed out gourd at his hip and drank from it. Terri wasn't sure why he was doing this and even more confused by not seeing the raven swallow.

Renek sported a sinister grin as he held his blade in front of himself and suddenly spat the liquid at Terri, making it ignite on his blade sending a cone of fire at the surprised cat. He felt flames licking at his fur and turned away but the arm holding the front end of his spear was engulfed fully. He jumped and screamed as he stumbled backwards with his arm in flames.

Terri's primal instincts kicked in. He waved his burning hand as he felt the fire burned through his fur and began to melt his skin. He rolled toward a pile of loose sand that the toolmakers used for sanding surfaces, and plunged his burning arm into it. Giving Renek time to close the gap between them. The raven stood over Terri lifting his sword triumphantly to plunge it down. But Terri reacted in time, kicking the raven's shin as hard as he could, knocking the raven's leg from underneath him. He heard a loud snap as the raven's leg buckled, making Renek fall down next to him.

The two men were now lying beside each other. Terri saw that Renek had dropped his weapon. He seized the opportunity and grabbed the obsidian knife from Renek's belt before the raven could reach it. He rolled on top of the raven. He could tell Renek was in pain, the bird's leg lay at an unnatural angle, bent at the shin. But this was not enough for Terri.

The tomcat knelt on the raven's chest as he stabbed the knife into the raven's good hand pinning it to the ground. Then he used his unburnt hand to jam the spear into Renek's side. The bird screamed even louder and those gleaming dark coals once again returned to Terri's mind. He felt his hand healing as the spears magic mended the burnt fur and cooked skin.

The raven tried to hit Terri with his obsidian arm, striking the cat's chest as hard as he could. The blow felt like being struck by a solid rock and drove the breath from Terri's lungs but he stayed on top of his enemy. He threw aside his spear and grabbed a stone and began smashing it down on the raven's gleaming orange and black arm.

He screamed with all his pent-up grief and anger. As the rock cracked and shattered the arm sending embers flying everywhere the raven's terrified eyes could only see Terri's eyes and mouth behind the war mask, twisted in hate.

By now Terri had completely tuned out the noise of the melee raging behind them. All that existed was Renek and the rock that slammed down on the cursed arm over and over until finally the black limb shattered, sending black shards everywhere.

The black bird screeched in pain, eyes wide with the same panic of an animal backed into a corner.

CHAPTER 9:

THE CRUEL

"I'm gonna enjoy this, "

He muttered as he grabbed one of the larger shards of obsidian that had come off the bird's broken arm. He held it like a knife and smiled. This was not the kind, gentle, joyful smile that his friends knew. This was something darker, and he reveled in it as he dug the sharp edge of the stone into the raven's forehead. He watched as the screaming bird's blood poured from the cut flowing over the brighter red of his tribal markings, darkening them as Terri kept cutting.

He did not need magic to inflict pain. He had come to terms with the fact that whatever this was it was a part of him now, and it adored his enemies' screams. He began tracing the raven's beak, cutting deeply into the area where the skull and beak connected.

Terri watched as the blade slowly severed the beak from the face as the raven began to weep in fear and pain. Renek was helpless in the hands of the thing that he had created inside the black-and-white tomcat looming over him.

Once most of the connection was severed Terri grabbed the black beak and ripped it away tossing it into the dirt. Renek's horrified screams became almost deafening. Terri smiled, hands soaked in blood as he sliced along the remaining arm splitting it open to watch Renek bleed out in pain.

He felt amazing. Adrenaline and pure joy coursing through his veins. He had channeled every drop of his grief into this and his revenge fanned those dark coals in his mind beautifully. He got up from the raven's chest and broke his other leg for good measure by stomping on it before walking away from the bird's mangled leader.

The battle behind him was as good as won. The birds were overwhelmed by the organized defense and presence of a shellwarrior, the walls around the village had turned into a kill box, keeping the attackers trapped as they got decimated. Some of them were even beginning to flee the scene when they had noticed what Terri had done to their leader in the back lines of the battle.

The deserters fled deep into the spirit wilds too terrified of being captured but also too scared to return to their chief with the news of defeat. When the last birds fled the village began to cheer in victory. They had paid dearly losing ten rabbits, but they had won what should have been a devastating and unfair fight.

Belloth and Zani approached Terri after she had dismounted the shell warrior. looking both concerned and a bit horrified when they saw what he had done to the raven slowly bleeding out behind Terri.

“Is everything okay bud?”

Asked Belloth, clearly unsure how to address his friend right now.

"Not yet. Renek is as good as dead but he was not the one who started this. Zarkan is still alive.”

He said grimly before turning to Zani.

“Do you know how to ride this thing?”

He asked, pointing at the bleeding flying lizard still struggling to get out of the ruins of the toolmaker's hut.

“Yeah but its pretty badly wounded i don’t think it'll make more than one or two trips”

“Then let's bandage its tail and go, two trips is all we need.”

Belloth shook his head.

“What's the point? Zarkan’s warriors are dead and scattered, he is no threat anymore.”

Terri's golden eyes flared with anger.

“For now! What if they regroup? What if he finds and takes over another tribe?”

“Fine I’ll help you get to Zarkan, I'll even help you kill him now that the village is safe. But I hope that's the last Violence i’ll have to do today.”

Suddenly there was a choking laughter from behind Terri. A deeply unsettling sound. Terri shot the bird a hateful glare, displeased with this display of amusement from a dying man. The Raven spoke, at least as well as he could without his beak and Zani's eyes widened in horror.

"N-no!"

The Raven laughed louder before falling into a coughing fit, spattering blood as his lungs heaved.

“What did he say?!”

Asked Belloth, clearly concerned about her reaction.

“Zarkan has a terrible spell as a backup in case his warriors get defeated. He will use it on this village if his warriors don't return.”

“What's the spell?!”

Belloth asked, gripping Zani's arms hard. He was hurting her but she understood why he was so fearful.

“Remember the big round hole we went to for the firestone? Apparently this spell creates those holes. It punches colossal holes into the world to wipe out a target!”

“How did any spirit ever agree to give something like that to a mortal?!”

Asked Belloth, audible shock in his voice.

“I don’t know but it doesn't matter now. Zani I will bandage the warbeast and you should probably tell the mountainfather about this Belloth.”

Said Terri, realizing that there was no time for panic, efficiency and speed was of the essence now, after all who knew how long Zarkan would wait to unleash this horrible spell if his warriors did not return.

It took them a good hour to free, bandage, and calm down the winged lizard, mostly with Zani’s help. She was familiar with her tribe's preferred tamed animals. She calmed it enough for the creature to be ready for takeoff when Belloth emerged from the burrows again still clutching his bloodied mace.

All three of them climbed onto the animal’s back carrying on their weapons to not weigh down their mount needlessly. They ascended quickly to the chagrin of Belloth who always felt more comfortable beneath or on the ground. The bird and cat were much more comfortable with heights.

To Terri the flight felt both short and interminable. It felt almost like he was developing a fever. A building heat had not subsided since he had killed Renek. When the tents and smoke of fires came into sight, Terri kept an eye out for a ritual circle under this foreign sun, his sharp vision soon found what he was looking for. He pointed down.

“There! I see the magic circle! The red area! I think I see your brother too! Try to pick him off with the beast's claws!”

He said to Zani who forced their mount down into a borderline suicidal dive attempting to tackle her brother. As the ground rapidly approached, Terri could see a ritual in progress. There were four people in the circle. One was tied-up in the middle. Another was holding a knife over the tied up person, another was sitting to the side drumming and finally he saw the subject of his ire.

The bird was huge, his body mostly transformed into gleaming flames and glistening obsidian with a few white feathers still poking out here and there. His face was obscured by an imposing mask. No, it was his face but twisted by the corruption of the wind of destruction. A grotesque visage of war and conquest that glared up at them with burning eyes as it realized they were coming for him.

He pointed up and yelled, causing everyone else at the circle to look up. The bird shaman took a swig from a familiar looking gourd and spat flame up at them spooking the animal into stalling. It crashed unceremoniously into the tents behind the ritual circle, shattering pots and tearing up cloth as it flailed and shrieked, clearly spooked by the fire. They got off the animals back and drew their weapons.

“Zani, try to find your tribe's guardian spirit. kill it so it can’t defend your brother. Belloth you and I will go and confront them to buy Zani time.”

They all nodded to Terri's plan before Zani ran off with a waterstone arrow ready to fire in her bow. Terri and Belloth jumped out of the wrecked tent seeing themselves faced with 3 charging men coming at them swinging obsidian axes.

The first met Belloth's mace head on, shattering his skull into paste and making his body collapse. The other two focused on Terri. One of them landed a terribly painful hit into Terri's shoulder making the tomcat scream as he felt his left arm go limp. He hissed and stabbed the other bird in the gut, twisting the spear to coax out an agonized screech as his arm healed. He wasn't sure how many healing strikes were left in his weapon and he was angry at the surviving warrior for having wasted one of them.

He hissed at the remaining warrior who realized too late that Terri's weapon was enchanted. The bird said something, looking fairly scared now but Terri ignored whatever plea the man was making and stabbed him in the neck, twisting the blade again as the bird choked and collapsed to his knees while Terri was again flooded with the warmth of healing magic. He pulled out the spear and moved on alongside Belloth, both holding their weapons raised threateningly as they marched up the hill where two more birds and their shaman waited.

The two men next to the shaman charged, with a mad devotion burning in their eyes, they both held daggers that crackled with lightning and leapt up in the air, soaring over the cat and rabbit to land just behind them. They turned around to face them exposing their backs to the shaman.

Meanwhile Zani was sprinting like mad through the rows of tents trying to find the shrine of Iziru, her tribe's guardian. She had worshiped at this shrine many times. It was a collapsible wooden structure that suited her tribe's nomadic lifestyle. She remembered well when her father had taken her and Zarkan here after he had been adopted in their family, long before their father had passed. She had viewed the spirit with the eyes of a devoted child back then, she had but now she was disgusted by it.

Her train of thought stopped when she saw it again. That curved roof, the sweeping wooden decor flanking the spindly spirit inside it, its body was fine and complex like lightning frozen in time. Its mask was long and slim. It had not yet noticed her and that was how she wanted it. She aimed and didn't even hesitate, she loosened the arrow, its blue shimmering tip gleaming in the dimming light of the evening sun, refracting the light brilliantly before it pierced the spirit's slender purple form.

She cursed its name when the light began to bleed from within the being she had once deemed holy. The scream was so loud that it could be heard throughout the entire village as the sun above slowly began moving up and away, no longer restrained by the power of a spirit.

Terri, Belloth and their opponents all heard it and saw the flash of light looking towards where it had happened. Belloth grinned.

"No spirit to protect you now!"

he roared using the moment of shock the birds were in to land a terrifying blow against one of the men's legs snapping it cleanly in half, forcing the bone through the skin.The bird fell, screaming and clutching his bleeding mangled leg before Belloth followed up by also crushing his skull.

The remaining man looked first at Terri and Belloth then up the hill at his shaman clearly torn between being more afraid of his leader's anger or the attackers. In the end he simply ran, dropping his magical weapons and leaving the shaman alone with Terri and Belloth. They turned to face the twisted bird who was reaching into a nearby bag before lifting up a clearly enchanted sword.

It was burning like Reneks, but larger and wielded with both hands. Terri could have sworn he saw the stone visage of the shaman curl into a smile as he began charging down the hill at them. The man's voice boomed from inside his obsidian shell.

“You have come to die, you featherless vermin!”

Terri and Belloth ran up the hill ready to clash with the shaman. Belloth was the one to take the first swing, aiming for the man's head with his heavy mace but the burning blade deflected the blow directing its force into empty air with the flat side of the blade.

Terri tried to use this moment of distraction to stab Zarkan but his blade glanced off the obsidian shell. He would have to be more methodical in his attacks and he began to circle his enemy as Belloth traded blows with the cursed being.

“I am going to kill you and then I will turn your pathetic village into a hole in the ground!"

He screamed, flames roaring from his eyes with each word. Terri went in again this time aiming more carefully for the white feathered areas of the shaman's body. He felt the Obsidian blade digging into flesh as Zarkan growled in pain before jerking his shoulder forward to dislodge Terri's spear. The burning eyes glared back at Terri.

“Coward! fight me head-on like the rabbit!”

“The only coward I see here is the one who slaughtered my tribe in a surprise attack.”

The obsidian bird deflected another blow of Belloth’s mace as he began to laugh.

“I see I wasn't thorough. Your kind will die with you today, cat!”

He bellowed before a glistening blue beam whizzed past Belloth striking Zarkan squarely in the shoulder. The waterstone arrow punctured the unnatural magic obsidian shell, forming glowing cracks as Zarkan roared in pain. His flaming eyes focused on the direction it had come from.

“Missed me brother? I didn't miss you.”

Zani’s voice was cold and hard, a tone that neither Terri nor Belloth knew from her. She loaded her second-to-last waterstone arrow.

"Traitor! You side with the vermin! I expected more even of an exile like you!”

Growled Zarkan as he tackled Belloth, ramming his obsidian shoulder into the rabbits chest to knock him over. Whatever magic was coursing through him clearly gave him unnatural strength to be able to knock over the large rabbit. He charged straight for Zani, burning sword lifted high to end his sister, enraged by her siding with non-birds.

Terri reacted instinctively, flexing his legs just right to propel him forward in a far leap spear held out in a desperate lunge to save Zani from her brother's burning blade. The spear connected once again with a gap in the obsidian plates making the shaman groan in pain making him falter in his charge to deal with the spear in his back. Zani quickly leapt into the air and flew to the top of the hill where the ritual circle was.

Belloth got up again grabbing his mace, enraged by Zarkan's attempt on his beloved Zani. Zarkan meanwhile flexed his back muscles pushing out the bloodied obsidian spear tip using his unnatural armor. He turned around now facing the trio.

Terri stood at ground level, Belloth halfway up the hill and Zani at the top. Terri held his spear in a guarding position between him and the bird but Zarkan clearly had no intention of respecting the cat's reach.

He took him by surprise with another shoulder charge slamming into Terri and flinging him backwards into the hillside next to Belloth making him lose grip. Sending the spear a good meter away from him and into the grass. Zarkan sneered down at the cat. Belloth realized what was about to happen and attempted to take a swing at Zarkan but the cursed shaman moved with a speed and force that Belloth could not stop in time.

The flaming blade came down hard, Terri felt its teeth biting into his chest as flames began to burn his fur. He screamed in pain as the weapon cleaved from his shoulder down into his ribs, fire spreading across his body. The tomcat thrashed and rolled to try and extinguish the flames. He could vaguely make out Belloth's pained scream and the sound of another arrow being loosed. Everything hurt. He could smell his own fur burning again. His vision became blurry as he heard the muffled sounds of combat.

Belloth was out of his mind with rage seeing how Zarkan had butchered his best friend. The rabbit was furious, swinging again and again on the shaman cracking his obsidian shell in many parts as the hard blows from Belloth's mace came surprisingly hard and fast. Anger drove the black rabbit to exert himself.

His already strong body was fueled with adrenaline and rage, a state that wouldn't be maintainable for long. Zani realized this and readied her final waterstone arrow. She tried to steady her breathing. She didn't like how this was going, she hadn't expected her brother to be this powerful by now. What they had done to his body would have killed a normal man by now.

The arrow released whirring through the air spinning and flexing before it found its mark hitting Zarkan in his left eye, his body buckled in pain as he grabbed the arrow ripping it out revealing that the eye's flame had died out.

“You fucking bitch! Father should have strangled you as a chick for being weak!”

“Don’t you dare mention him! He would be disgusted with what you’ve become!”

She screamed tears welling up in her eyes. Despite all his monstrosity Zarkan was still her brother and the words he spoke still hurt her. Zarkan's remaining eye narrowed as he swung his blade at Belloth trying to end him quickly but his blade was not well aligned hitting the rabbit in the shoulder with the flat side singeing his fur and making him flinch in pain.

The shaman saw his opening and ran uphill to finally get at his sister. He seemed to hate her even more than Terri and Belloth despite being his kin. The flaming sword was once again swung to meet the archer who quickly drew her stone daggers trying to guard from the large blade.

The Shaman suddenly screamed in pain and fell face first onto the slope, landing at his sister's feet. The cause of this fall was Terri's spear buried deep in Zarkan's ankle. The tomcat gasped with relief as his body slowly knitted itself together again and the burnt fur returned.

“T-that's probably the last hit I can heal, I can’t take a strike like that again, we have to finish this quickly.”

He groaned as he got up. Pulling out the spear to lean on it for support as he caught his breath, crawling over to grab the spear while being almost cut in half had taken a colossal amount of pain and willpower.

Bellot quickly moved to his side, his shoulder still smoldering a bit as he lifted his mace while Zarkan tried to get back up. The heavy stone weapon struck the arm reaching for the fallen burning blade shattering it at the elbow. Terri joined in stabbing the other ankle making sure to twist the spear as Zarkan howled with pain. He tried to reach with his other hand but Zani stepped on it pinning it to the ground with her full weight.

“Get off me! You're aiding this filth! Father would strike you down where you stand!”

He growled, spewing venom with every word. Terri was getting tired of his voice. Belloth lifted his mace again to shatter the other arm that Zani was pinning down, leaving the mad shaman crippled on the ground trying to crawl away from them while he fumed with rage.

“Belloth can you flip him over? I want to look at his face when he dies.”

The rabbit gladly fulfilled Terri's request, flipping the heavy bird chief onto his back to face them. The monstrous man looked a lot less intimidating with both arms shattered and his feet crippled. Terri glared down at him from behind his wooden war mask. A smile crept onto his face while Zani and Belloth stepped back. They knew that no matter how much Zarkan had hurt them, it didn't measure up to the pain he had inflicted on Terri. They ceded the kill to him.

“You know if I had met you on that day in my village I would have given you a quick painless death. It was the way I used to fight. But you were not there. You hid and let Renek do your dirty work. You are worse than a genocider because you are cowardly too. You embody destruction yet you did not have the guts to face the people you murdered in cold blood.”

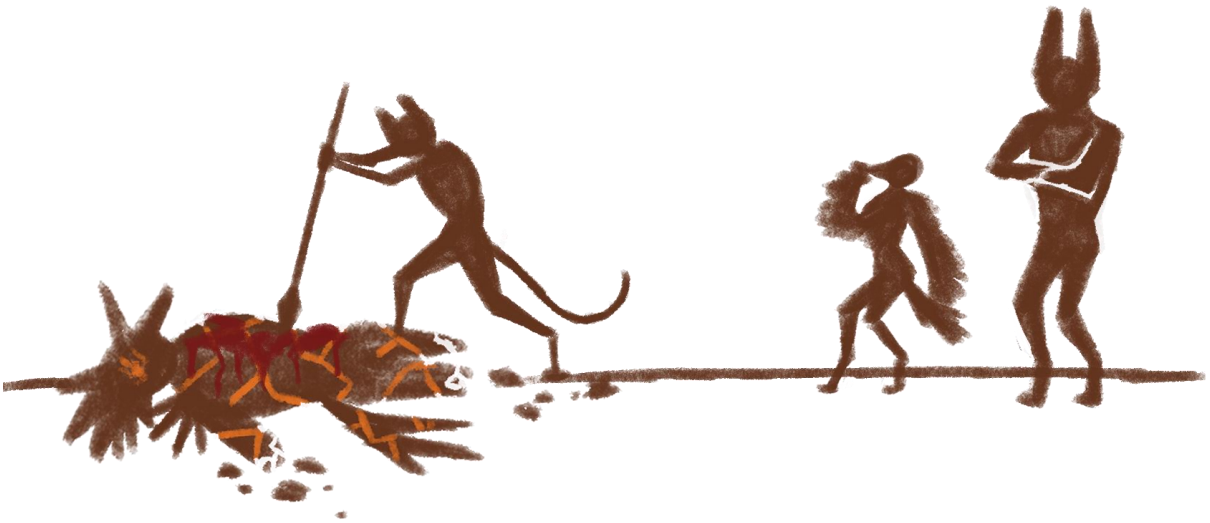
He felt the familiar heat of those dark coals returning while he spoke with a cold inflection. It was more concentrated now, even more so than when he had killed Renek. His fingers tingled with the need for action. He lifted his spear over Zarkan aiming for one of the white gaps in his black shell. He plunged the spear down into his stomach with a smile, twisting it to hear Zarkan scream in pain as he stirred his insides, tearing through organs as he went.

“We are so lucky you didn't fully transform, that way I get to have fun with the parts of you that are still flesh, the parts that I can slice. But they are so hard to get to… let’s change that”

He pulled the spear back using it like a lever. The screams grew louder as the obsidian and glowing embers were pulled off of the bird's stomach coming off in a large gleaming sheet that was covered in blood on its underside. Clearly it hadn't just been his feathers that had turned to obsidian but his skin

and muscles too. Zani covered her hands over her beak in shock. She had seen what Terri had done to Renek but she hadn't expected he would be capable of worse.

“See you're scary and made of fire and stone on the outside but your insides are still soft like ours…”



He began to stab into the open stomach cavity over and over making blood spray as he twisted the spear again and again making sure not to hit Zarkan’s diaphragm. He wanted to keep the bird breathing for as long as possible. Belloth averted his eyes and Zani covered hers.

He was delighted by Zarkan's screams; it fed those dark embers that filled the void where his tribe had been in his heart. He pulled the spear back again and aimed lower stabbing into the bird's knees, shattering his still-soft joints before he began tracing the gaps in the shell. Cutting open every spot that wasn't armored. He did it slowly dragging his spear tip along every patch of white feathers, making Zarkan bleed as he squirmed. The screaming was dying down mostly due to the birds vocal cords giving out.

Terri began pulling off every patch of obsidian that was not yet fully formed, leaving gaping bleeding holes in the bird's body where muscles, skin and feathers had been. The last shell he severed from the dying bird's body was the one protecting his chest. This was the largest plate and Terri strained but kept it moving, working with all his force to rip open Zarkan's chest cavity revealing his rapidly heaving lungs and thumping heart.

He purred happily as he grasped Zarkan's heart digging his claws into it as it still beat before ripping it out very slowly, severing artery after artery as the burning eye watched in horror until the head slumped lifelessly backward when Terri fully severed the heart holding it in his hand triumphantly.

He looked down at the disemboweled bleeding and smoldering corpse, the embers inside the bird were dying down as both life and magic left his body, leaving it a bloody husk. He tossed the heart into the dirt before wiping most of the blood from his hands off onto his loincloth. He knelt down and pulled a few of Zarkan's white feathers out, tying them to the front of his spear. After what felt like an eternity of silence Belloth spoke.

“Alright we got him, and you got your revenge. Let's go home.”

By now the sun had fully dimmed, bathing the scene into a darkness that was only illuminated by the stars and the still burning blade lying next to the corpse. Terri looked at his friends. He wanted to say yes, but he realized that those coals were not gone. They still smoldered in his chest.

"No…"

“What do you mean no? Zarkan’s dead, you tortured him just now, what else is there to do?!”

“I have a need to inflict pain. I have done it before. On hunts it was an accident. For magic it was a necessity. For revenge it was justified. But now it persists. I can’t stay with you. Something is wrong with me!”

He shouted, tearing up, uprising himself with the sudden outburst at his friends. He was shaking now.

“I see… We could help you, you know? maybe the shamans know a cure?”

Terri shook his head.

“Whatever is wrong with me does not seem like magic. I don't want to be around people I care for. What if I hurt you? Or someone in your tribe? I will not risk it. I will take my bag and leave. I will direct this outwards, at people who deserve it until I find a way to stop. I promise I will return eventually but I need to do this on my own.”

Belloth could not really argue, he had seen what Terri was capable of now, this grief had changed his friend in a way that scared him even if he didn't outwardly show it. So the rabbit nodded.

“Okay. We will take you to the edge of the village and I will bring out your bag. Just know that we will wait for you. When you get better there will always be a burrow waiting for you at the foot of our mountain. Just promise me you will come back.”

"I promise, Belloth.”

"Swear it. Swear on your tribe!”

Belloth spoke with a challenge in his voice. Making Terri swear on his greatest loss was one last attempt to see if he was really serious, to see if he really was willing to leave. Terri did not even hesitate and lifted his hand, palm facing Belloth, and placed the other against his heart.

“I swear on my tribe and their memory that I will one day return. You have my word as a son of Muiari”

Belloth nodded as Zani looked over at Terri, unsure what to say or do. She wanted to thank the cat for ending the living nightmare but at the same time she was sure she would have new nightmares from witnessing his revenge. So she remained silent as she left to ready the flying Lizard for their trip back. Terri went to the ritual circle to cut loose the otter who had almost been sacrificed if they hadn't intervened. The man thanked them profusely before hurrying off into the now-empty camp to gather supplies and return to his own tribe to look for survivors. They let him go and mounted the flying beast one more time.

They arrived outside of the tribe's walls while the rest of the tribe slept. Tomorrow many bodies would have to be buried, the inside of the walls was still splattered with blood and the remains of the dead invaders.

Terri waited patiently until Belloth and Zani returned with his bag of belongings. He took it and looked long and hard at his friends. He hesitated for a moment but hugged them both, pulling them in close.

"I will be back."

"I know, bud. You never broke a promise."

Now Zani spoke for the first time since their return.

"We will wait for you Terri. You did so much for everyone here, Please stay safe out there."

The tomcat let go and nodded, turning his back as he began walking away from all he had ever known, carrying those gleaming coals inside him, searching for a way to one day extinguish them.

He knew it would be a long walk and he hoped he would find water for the soul at its **end.**